

# **CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN A CHINESE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY**

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## Summary

Reviewing previous works on the social implications of computer-mediated communication (CMC) unpacks two schools of thought in the literature: the optimist school, which bolsters the argument that CMC expands social relations and re-creates social identity; and the pessimist school, obdurate in the conviction that CMC decays strong networks and weakens interpersonal support. But the paradox turns out to be a tradeoff between width and depth. Unwittingly, there is a confluence of thought: both agree that intensive offline and dispersive online interactions contribute to social capital, mainly understood in psychological and relational dimensions. This has changed over time, due to numerous factors such as an increasing awareness of citizenship and a growing sense of community, the emergence of new social forces and voluntary organizations, active civic engagement and complex horizontal networking.

This thesis holds the position that CMC provides new opportunities for social capital formation and explores the complex mechanisms underlying the process, synthesizing resource mobilization and social psychology theory. It addresses questions on the why, and how, people may be mobilized to voluntarily participate in virtual discussion and even offline actions through the different usage of social resources.

The empirical section then investigates the process in three main aspects: (i) resource usage, (ii) agents' relations, and (iii) mobilization, employing content analysis of online posts, articles and documentary materials, online and offline interviews in a popular non-focused virtual community in China – *Tianya*. This section shows in detail: (1) how the social resources are redistributed through CMC; (2) how individuals' use of these redistributed resources affects social relations and values; and (3) how resources embedded in different social relations sharing certain values can be mobilized for collective action. From the findings, the paper outlines three general patterns: (1) resources are redistributed through the creation of new resources and employment of existing resources; (2) relations are rebuilt in two dimensions – homophilous and heterophilous; and (3) collective actions are mobilized by collective identity, group leadership and social environment. Chapter 4 deals with the first two aspects, espousing that CMC tends to extricate people from their real lives, transforming them into virtual individuals without impairing their respective social roles, and (re)grouping them into associations within certain degree of state manipulation.

Based on these discussions, Chapter 5 explores the process of collective mobilization, buttressed by in-depth case study of one high-profile event, the course of which was changed by CMC. The case chosen here is “Duo Maomao (Hide-and-seek)”, which highlights the irresponsibility of a local public security bureau in publicizing that a prisoner had died while playing “hide-and-seek”. The effects of CMC on collective

mobilization depend on the nature of events, participants' available resources, the structure and quality of interpersonal relations, community purposes, political grounds and many other factors. To this end, obstacles to social capital accumulation are also discussed, such as authoritarianism, and the ambiguities in community rules.

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## Glossary

<i>Gi ti zhu yi:</i>	Collectivism
<i>Ban zhu:</i>	Moderator
<i>Duo Maomao:</i>	Hide-and-seek, or, elude the cat
<i>E gao:</i>	Culture jamming
<i>Huoyue fenzi:</i>	Active participant
<i>Zhan zhang:</i>	Webmaster
<i>Wu Mao:</i>	Five cents, referring to people the government hires to praise it online
<i>Wu Mao Dang:</i>	Five-cent Party

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background

The mushrooming of information and communication technologies in China gives rise to a brand-new vocabulary — “CMC (Computer-mediated communication)” — used to describe communication based on the Internet. CMC has changed Chinese citizens’ lives to an enormous extent, penetrating diverse social areas such as human exploitation, nationalism, environment protection, anti-corruption, single parenthood, and so on. In China, social causes seem to go hand-in-hand with CMC, and it is rare for influential organizations not to have some form of Internet presence.

This promising technological development brings about a new round of socio-economic transformation, one that raises citizens’ awareness and interest in civic participation, highlighting the weakness of civic engagement under current institutions, law and social norms. It is generally accepted that China is in dire deficiency of civic tradition, suffering from an “institutional vacuum” during this transitional period – including economic marketization, political democratization, and culture diversification. In this regard, existing channels cannot satisfy ordinary citizens’ increasing need for participation. Viewed in this context, CMC in virtual communities is considered a riskless, flexible, convenient and effective channel with which to convey political appeals and formulate political demands, especially for

ordinary, powerless and marginalized citizens.

Initially, governments were willing to support CMC development for cheaper information, effective servicing, and instant public opinions. But often, circumstances and environments change since what social actors — as individuals, or groups of individuals — envisage and hope for is the transformation of political systems and governance, which they perceive to be ineffective. The crisis of legitimacy caused by their hope has seriously threatened state manipulation. On the other hand, CMC, as a new social operating system, is often an indispensable channel for the state to win the support of the masses and for the society to attain political legitimacy.

Recent research on Internet use in China has focused on the power of technology in social life. The proliferation of the Internet has opened Pandora's box for the public, allowing new accesses to information, and offering a public sphere for civic communication, interaction or even collective action. Without it, a limited civil society based on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) would provide citizens little room for political participation. It would have been inconceivable for the public, especially the marginalized, to convey ideas as effectively and quickly, let alone the opportunity to create a sense of citizenship as the very foundation of Chinese society. However, we should not be too quick to celebrate virtual interaction as a silver bullet for social illnesses, taking for granted that the Internet would revolutionize Chinese

society. In fact, Chinese Internet is increasingly scrutinized and under stringent state control and supervision, and this has left considerable effects on Chinese society.

Two aspects that are often ignored or not explored in research on Chinese Internet analysis including: (1) cyberspace as just one part of social space, rather than as something contradicting it; (2) it is individuals' participation in online activities, and not the information technology in itself, that is key to creating civic environment and social assets. However, these are the two preconditions of this research. As Jones pointed out, the social landscape of the Internet is important in these aspects:

It is not that distance I made meaningless, but once we are all connected in cyberspace we are then infinitely distant from one another when we are not communicating...It is ours to fill and try to save rather than to experience and understand.<sup>1</sup>

To put it another way, cyberspace is promoted as social space because it is made by people, and thus as the "new public space" it conjoins traditional mythic narratives of progress with the strong modern impulses toward self-fulfillment and personal development.<sup>2</sup>

Within this brand-new social space, contentious social events arise and are spread around China every now and then, becoming attractive fodder for informed netizens.

## **1.2 Problem Description**

The technological possibility, social pressure, as well as personal yearning for connectedness, give rise to flourishing virtual communities. Over time, Chinese citizens have become increasingly active in CMC, which helps the society step into a

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<sup>1</sup> Steven G. Jones, *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety* (London, Britain: SAGE Publications, 1997), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 22.

new age of civic engagement.<sup>3</sup> Netizens read, think and participate, but few have cognizance as to what exactly they are doing online, and whether, and how, their actions matter to the social landscape. But this is not the reason to ignore its momentous effects.

There are various perspectives to understand the repertoire of CMC on social capital. One school of thought argues that Internet usage expands the scope of social capital, promotes social integration, facilitates collective action and sustains social stability.<sup>4</sup> Another school views virtual activities as the main factor in decreasing civic engagement, voluntary organization membership and resulting in a more fragmented society.<sup>5</sup> A more contextual perspective emphasizes that “Internet use neither consumes nor produces trust”.<sup>6</sup> The dilemma exists mostly in democratic countries that have both comprehensive institutions and a rich “civic culture” to lubricate social cooperation and influence government policies. In authoritarian China, virtual communities — the focal sites for isolated individuals to meet up — should serve a

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<sup>3</sup> According to the latest Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (January 2010) by CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center), the number of Chinese people participating in BBS (Bulletin Board System) forums was 117.01 million, increased by 26.01 million.

<sup>4</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Bruce Bimber, Cynthia Stohl and Andrew J. Flanagin, “Technological Change and the Shifting Nature of Political Organization”, in *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, ed. Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard. (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Norman H. Nie, “Sociability, Interpersonal Relations, and the Internet: Reconciling Conflicting Findings”, *American Behavioral Scientist* 45, 3 (2001): 420-435; Peter A. Hall, “Great Britain: The Role of Government and the Distribution of Social Capital”, in *Democracies in Flux: The evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society*, ed. Robert D. Putnam. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Marc A. Smith. “Voices from the WELL: The Logic of the Virtual Commons”. Master diss., University of California, 1992; Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993); James E. Katz and Ronald E. Rice, *Social Consequences of Internet Use: Access, Involvement, and Interaction* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002); Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite, *The Internet in everyday life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Eric M. Uslaner, “Social Capital and the Net”, in *The Internet in Public Life*, ed., Gehring, Verna V. Lanham. (Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004).

crucial role in social cooperation. The ongoing challenge for scholarship on the Chinese experience, then, is the causal connections with organized structure.

We should, therefore, ask: how does CMC in Chinese virtual communities affects social capital under tightening state control? Does the Chinese government's authoritarian political system matter? Who are these participants in virtual communities, and why do they choose to participate? Does online interaction spill over into offline life? Compared with face-to-face communication, what are the prominent features of CMC? To answer these questions, this thesis makes a synergy of resource mobilization and social psychology theories to tell people what is actually happening to CMC, and where it could go from here.

This synergy considers both rational choices of resource usage and emotional feelings of shared grievance, deriving directly from relevant collective action theory. It takes into account both the ingrained cultural and political situations, and the irresistible trend of individualization in this transitional period. This could be particularly helpful in explaining collective mobilization through CMC, since the two aspects respond to individual and collective dimensions of social capital.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> James Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital", *American Journal of Sociology* 94 Supplement (1988): s95-s120.

### 1.3 Research Design and Methodology

An ethnographic approach is adopted to explain the variety of mechanisms constructing social capital through CMC and understand the operation of the ecological habitus. To accurately report what is going on in virtual communities, it is ideal if the researcher has been actively involved with them. On this note, I have been a heavy Internet user for over five years, considering myself especially well versed with the Chinese virtual space. I am a member of many communities such as *Tianya*, *Qiangguo Luntan*, and several university BBS forums. The experience of searching information, observing others' behaviors, joining in their conversations by posting gives me deep understanding of CMC in China. As an ordinary netizen, I have witnessed or experienced the revolutionary power and dark side of CMC, state power and society reaction, and have felt and experienced the sense of community, of "belonging". As a researcher in this area, I have observed what others are doing online and their perceptions of this new technology in general. I have kept a watchful eye on possible social reactions to multifarious online phenomenon and the patterns of these reactions in affecting social capital.

*Tianya* is one of the most popular virtual communities in China, embracing nearly all kinds of acephalous discussions online, widely publicizing many high profile cases on the Internet, which makes it the optimal platform by which to investigate the social landscape of Chinese virtual communities. To narrow the research scope and for greater accuracy, I chose to base my content analysis on one sub-community in



*Tianya* — “*Tianya Zatan*” — primarily because, unlike other columns, this group is sufficiently diverse and, at the same time, does not show apparent political color, social or economic biases. Under this condition, participation can be regarded as more spontaneous, non-purposive and voluntary, in accordance with the inclusiveness of social capital and neutrality of CMC.

In addition to this personal experience, other methods used in this thesis include:

(1) Secondary sources such as media reports, published information and documentary materials. Statistical reports from some research organizations, such as China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), and World Internet Project, were used as the starting point. I present an overview of the demographic distribution of Chinese netizens from CNNIC’s Statistical Survey Report on Internet Development. I also utilized ideas from documents published on Chinese online participation as the basis for my field research and online interviews.

(2) Ethnographic research, starting with general information and relative questions that arise from my research. Every day, for three months, from August 19 to November 18, 2010, I logged on and viewed online posts in *Tianya* at a fixed time — 21:00 hours — with the aim of making qualitative sampling more scientific and random, and controlling interview bias. Each day, for convenience and simplicity, I chose just 10 out of 100 posts, at a distance of 10 posts, from the

front page of *Tianya Zatan*.

- (3) Content analysis of the selected daily posts for two purposes: (a) to obtain statistical data of online posts categorization in *Tianya Zatan*; (b) to explore the process of voluntary participation and the mechanisms of forming and transforming social capital during this process. For the first purpose, sustaining analyses on posts' themes and content can work. For the second, I recognized that prolonged effort should be made to observe what happens, as well as to participate in discussions to obtain data firsthand. In the absence of a standard qualitative research method, I adopted an approach that would include all data that could inform me of CMC, which I believe is essential for understanding variations in personal feelings and participatory motivations over time.

To Malinowski, time is a crucial element of ethnographic research. To avoid or mitigate the feeling of obtrusiveness, a researcher has to spend as much time as possible living with people who are being observed. As he put it:

It must be remembered that as the natives saw me constantly everyday, they ceased to be interested or alarmed, or made self-conscious by my presence, and I ceased to be a disturbing element in the tribal life that I was to study.<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately, online observation can take place without the explicit need to alert the subject being studied. I was able to passively observe on the sidelines without

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<sup>8</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (New York: Dutton, 1992), 8.

disturbing the usual threads of debate and discussion. In short, I took on an active participant role in online activities with the intention of looking into others' feelings, yet striving to remain level headed enough to record my observations.

(4) Observation and content analysis, collecting evidence to support or challenge the hypotheses, after which interviews could then be carried out. There are diverse ways of interviewing, such as casual chats, individual and group interviews, and so on. In terms of location, interviews in this research are divided into real-life and online interviews. At the beginning, interviews-in-person were carried out in Beijing, China, with different social actors including government officials (five), media workers (five) and professors (four), on their perceptions of CMC. With their permission, a tape recorder was used; this enabled easy retrospection. Real-life interviews allowed me to test their perspectives in light of previous academic work, news reports and commentary, and also to verify or improve on the propositions in my proposal.

(5) Online interview, which was key to this research, using mainly private messaging, which offered little threat to identity revelation. This turned out to be both advantageous and disadvantageous. Although netizens were generally more willing to accept online interviews that gave the assurance of greater anonymity, it also meant that they could ignore these interview requests, as they were less accountable to the interviewer. Under this condition, interpersonal relationships

with some community members, or at least being familiar with them, were significant. Once started, snowball sampling was indispensable.

This research draws upon research into the participants' daily lives in *Tianya*, during which 17 online interviews with *Tianyaers* were conducted (5 moderators, 6 activists, 6 ordinary members). These were netizens who responded to my personal invitation on *Tianya* to participate in this research project. I selected those I wanted to target, making sure I had relatively equal numbers of interviewees in the three groups (moderators, activists, ordinary members) of netizens. Thus, their views were not necessarily representative of all or most *Tianyaers*, but could reflect main aspects of CMC in *Tianya*. Their "speaking" styles and potential attitudes were also carefully recorded and transcribed.

(6) Online interviews, which were the most important and tedious part of my methodology. From the outset, I informed interviewees of my identity and purpose of research. They allowed me to record and use our text-based chatting records. Thus, the open-ended style of collecting data/interview was preferred. I also provided an outline of general aspects that guided my research objectives (Appendix A). But the actual questions were still subjected to a level of discretion. The aim here was to understand how people felt in their capacity as online moderators, activists or ordinary members, rather than be influenced by my thought processes. All interviews were conducted in Chinese.

(7) An in-depth case study of Duo Maomao, in which CMC played a huge factor and provided empirical evidence on this topic. I scrutinized archives from *Tianya*. A particularity of this case was the government-netizen cooperation in promoting collective action: the “Truth Investigation Committee”, with representation from both government officials and netizens. The most influential members of this committee were from *Tianya*, which suited the ongoing analysis. Although great debates engendered on the investigation committee, the occurrence of this case is the first attempt in opening up investigation and expanding channels for civic engagement. This case study provided insights into how social events may play out in a typical Chinese virtual community.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Theoretical Framework**

As the thesis mainly explores the mechanisms of constructing social capital through CMC in virtual communities, the literature is comprised of two parts: social capital and CMC. The first section of this chapter, therefore, presents a theory of social capital on the part of social actors who invest and mobilize it under different social contexts, by categorizing existing research into three branches: resource theory, network theory and capability theory. It then derives a comprehensive theory of social capital that accords with resource mobilization and social psychology theories of social movements. Firmly anchored within these two theories, the second section summarizes the influences of CMC on social capital: resource distribution, relations building and collective mobilization. It aims at bridging the conceptual gap between CMC and social capital. Finally, the third section sets forth the theoretical framework of the mechanisms in Chinese virtual communities.<sup>9</sup>

### **2.1 General Theories of Social Capital**

The concept of social capital was proposed initially by sociologists to comprehend the informal culture appreciating social support, social cohesion, and social coalescence in any society, which concerns a payoff among multiple social actors. Despite its

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<sup>9</sup> The specialty of this approach lies in its combination of resource mobilization and social psychology theories. Most opponents of resource mobilization theory criticize that it imputes a neutral characteristic to the use of technology, pays little attention to the cultural aspect of collective action, and focuses mainly on the micro- and meso-levels of social implication. This paper then presents a more syntopian understanding on the topic.

short history, there are remarkable complexities and disputes on its sources, features, performance and effects. The differences between the myriad definitions of social capital are not fundamental but, rather, stem from different approaches or angles used to frame the distinction. Researchers define it in relation to their operational purposes and for the sake of explanatory value, as do the three branches of social capital concept presented below<sup>10</sup>. There is no clear-cut distinction or incompatibility between them; rather, they can co-exist or even be mutually inclusive to some extent. The study of these theories aims to look for connections and to incorporate them into a new matrix of social capital, rather than seeking to create a new theory. This conceptualization details processes operating between determinants and manifestation of social capital, attempting to reach a general pattern for a CMC discussion.

### **2.1.1 Resource Theory**

Resource theory coins the essence of social capital as multiple resources — both material and symbolic — that can be employed for the interests of individuals as well as the collective. The nature of the resources, the access to resources, and the purposes for which they are used, determine the variety of civic associations, participation in civic affairs, and senses of community.<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu asserts that one's available resources, anchored in certain groups or a clump of social structure built on

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<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Social Capital", in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986); Coleman, 1988; Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The social virtues and the creation of prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Nan Lin, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); James E. Katz, and Ronald E. Rice, *Social Consequences of Internet Use: Access, Involvement, and Interaction* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

mutual acquaintance, is the central part and a distinctive advantage of social capital. Based on Bourdieu's discussion on the three types of capital, one of which is social capital, Lin contends that resource is at the core of all kinds of capital, which includes "material goods such as land, houses, cars and money and symbolic goods such as education, club membership, honorific degrees, nobility or organizational titles, family names, reputation, or fame"<sup>12</sup>.

In terms of ownership or access, both Bourdieu and Lin agree that gaining and using social capital is more likely an outcome of group activities elicited by individual interests in investment.<sup>13</sup> They interpret social capital as a cross-dimensional concept: although it cannot be formed without individual behaviors, social capital does not situate its power in any single individual; it is the combination of individual and collective aspects that constitutes this concept. The particularity of every individual indicates the inevitability of resource-distribution inequality, making the dynamics of resource redistribution/exchange possible and important. Through exchanges of resources among social actors, values may be added, and connections built. Besides, social resources are only accessible through social networks. Their approach reconciles structural inequalities and constructivist interpretations of human agency.

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<sup>12</sup> Lin, 2001, 43.

<sup>13</sup> This coincides with the social background of the popularity of social capital research in America in the 1980s. The emergence of communitarianism in response to individualism, on which social capital concept was built, emphasized on both individual rights and collective interests.



### 2.1.2 Network Theory

This theory or approach explores the structural aspects of social capital — social networks, their patterns, density and strengths — where resources are embedded, and categorized into homophilous and heterophilous<sup>14</sup>, and strong and weak types. The purpose of these two ways of categorization is similar: to explore the diversity of relation building.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, it is to explore how people access and use resources differently and how these differences affect their social networks.

In measuring, both Coleman and Putnam concentrate on membership in voluntary associations. For Coleman, “all social relations and social structures facilitate some forms of social capital”<sup>16</sup> but only certain kinds of social relations that bear the feature of “closure” can contribute to social cooperation significantly. It is the “closure” of social networks — the homophilous type — that creates trustworthiness and effective norms. The heterophilous type shapes inter-group connections with people of significant differences in one or more aspects, such as backgrounds or knowledge, which is more difficult to construct.

Although not by nature benign or malign, nevertheless, homophilous networks are often more likely to build strong relations; heterophilous networks are weaker in terms of the frequency and intensity of interaction. This engenders another way of

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<sup>14</sup> Lin use the two terms “homophilous” and “heterophilous”, which have the same meaning as the expression of “bonding” and “bridging” in Putnam’s term.

<sup>15</sup> For Bourdieu, Putnam and Coleman, although homophilous networks are recognized as not praiseworthy by nature, they are still been paid exclusive attention to and imputed a benign nature. And their categorization of homo- and heterophilous networks is to decide which is better for social development.

<sup>16</sup> Coleman, 1988, S105.

categorization: the strong and weak networks. According to previous researches, social capital is the accumulated return or manifestation of social relations formed in voluntary organizations, such as in churches, trade union, bird-watching clubs and so on.<sup>17</sup> The change in associational membership, therefore, as Putnam proposes, is the main factor in the decline of social capital in the last half of 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Ideally, social capital within a group brings about a host of benefits for that group, but not necessarily for the wholesome development of the entire community. However, the concentration on closure ignores the importance of bridging ties that could help people with more or better resources.

Similarly, some researchers take it for granted that strong ties in formal associations are more powerful than weak ties in informal community groups.<sup>18</sup> However, on closer inspection, weak relations formed through civic participation, such as working, chatting with friends and relatives, studying and debating issues, seem to be more likely to involve people.<sup>19</sup> With fewer boundaries, weak relations help to preserve personal integrity, creativity and provide new opportunities for collective evolution.

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<sup>17</sup> Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” in *Bowling alone*, p19. Simply put, the return or manifestation of resource investment in his definition includes trust, norms of reciprocity and social networks.

<sup>18</sup> Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000; Theda Skocpol, and Morris P. Fiorina, “Making Sense of the Civic Engagement Debate”. In *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, edited by Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Mark Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties”, *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973): 1360-1380, “The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited”, *Sociology Theory* 1 (1983): 201-233, “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness”, *American Journal of Sociology* 91 (1985): 481-510; Hall, 2002; Robert Wuthnow, “Bridging the Privileged and the Marginalized”, in *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective*, edited by Partha Dasgupta and Ismail Serageldin, 59-102 (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2000; Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1994); Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Putnam, 2000.

Besides structures, another school of network theory highlights the quality and content of social relations, which “describes the relationships capturing the innate feeling people have towards each other and the things they need to do in order to get along well and work together toward achievement of common goals”<sup>20</sup>. Generally, it covers a wide range of social values, including trust, reciprocity, identity and emotional feelings to help glue different social parts together. Without it, perhaps, individuals may disperse, informal social relations wither, society subsides, and even rebellion could take place when state control becomes unbearable. For instance, the social identity of being a citizen, which Coleman describes as “entering into a promiscuous relationship with strangers within a political community”<sup>21</sup>, guarantees the sustainability of these relations. Otherwise, indifference, cynicism and even hatred would overwhelm our daily life.

In addition, social norms of reciprocity, which depend on the expectation or speculation of reward in the future for the help provided in the present, have turned out to be the basis of social support.<sup>22</sup> Coleman finds these norms are actions that have “similar externalities for a set of others”<sup>23</sup> that people rely on to form and sustain social relations. Together with other shared values, reciprocity benefits relations in its capacity to reduce the transaction costs and increase interaction

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<sup>20</sup> Ben Kei Daniel. *Social Capital in Virtual Communities: Bayesian Belief Network Approaches* (Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2009), 30.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Coleman and Jay G. Blumier. *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Barry Wellman, “Applying Network Analysis to the Study of Support”, in *Social Networks and Social Support*, edited by Benjamin H. Gottlieb (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Coleman, 1994, 251.

possibilities. In return, these relations will strengthen the values shared by participants. The structure and content of social networks thus seem to complement each other.

Compared to measuring the relational dimension by atomizing it into multiple indicators to get an average number within one group, region or nation, much less has been done to explain the questions of “who has what kinds of social capital at different times in a particular context, and why?” Previous research ignores the fact that social capital can never be distributed evenly among different social actors, and dismisses the diversity of resources and networks. Instead, the academic community has paid much attention to the capability of social networks in lubricating cooperation. A great amount of research thus frames the theory based on its capability.

### **2.1.3 Capability Theory**

Once patterns of access to social resources and networks have been delineated, it is time for researchers to interpret the possible outcomes or contributions of these resources. This is the essence of capability theory. Capability theory outlines social capital in a more utilitarian way by focusing on the effects it could bring to actors. For instance, Fukuyama interprets it as the ability to promote interpersonal cooperation conducive to effective economic development and associational life.<sup>24</sup> He emphasizes that whether certain norms can be components of social capital depends on their ability to lubricate cooperation. Moreover, Coleman also believes that social

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<sup>24</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 1995; “Social Capital, Civil Society and Development”, *Third World Quarterly* 22(2001): 7-20.

capital can only be defined by its function. The problem with this school is that it confuses causes with effects and exclusively concentrates on benign aspects of social capital. However, it is the starting point to explore the more practical side of this social asset — mobilizing collective actions in maintaining their existing resources, or creating new ones to deal with personal and social issues. For Fukuyama, ways of mobilization in the economic sphere include the state, religion and globalization.<sup>25</sup>

Table 2.1 Different Theories of Social Capital

Theories	Authors	Components	Indications
Resource theory	Bourdieu (1986)	Available resources built on mutual acquaintance,	Networks build on resource exchange. Resources are only accessible through social networks
	Katz & Rice (2002)	Material and symbolic type, For both individual and	
	Lin (2001)	collective interests	
Network theory	Granovetter (1983)	Weak and strong ties	Networks should be mobilized in collective action to maintain existing resources or create new resources.
	Coleman (1990, 1994)	Micro-level reciprocity, closure between networks	
	Putnam (2000)	Bonding and bridging networks Macro-level reciprocity	
	Lin (2001)	Homophilous and heterophilous networks	
Capability theory	Coleman (1988)	Facilitate certain actions of individuals within the networks	Mobilize Collective actions in an economic perspective
	Fukuyama (1995)	The ability of people to work together for common purposes	

From the earlier discussions, Table 2.1 presents a comparison of different theories of social capital. Modified from Lin’s definition, this thesis defines social capital as

<sup>25</sup> Fukuyama, 1995; “Social Capital, Civil Society and Development”, *Third World Quarterly* 22(2001): 17-19.

social resources embedded in networks formed through resource exchange, which can be mobilized in collective actions.

## **2.2 CMC in Virtual Communities and Social Capital**

As a medium for public opinion in this information era, CMC in virtual communities has proliferated new forms of communication and new ways of life, and is likely to continue to spread and flourish. As a result, it is inevitable that resource allocation, availability, opportunity structure and constraints, and social demands will continue to be reformulated. Based on theories discussed above, this section sketches the ways of CMC by which social resources are redistributed, social networks formed and collective actions mobilized. Before interpreting CMC in virtual communities, we should first rethink the concept of community.

### **2.2.1 The Community and Virtual Community**

A traditional community is broadly recognized as a group of organisms building on the face-to-face communication of people living within physical proximity. Broadly speaking, studies on communities generalize two main conceptual threads: geographical and relational. Similarly, Riger and Lavrakas identify two significant elements of urban neighborhoods: social bonding and physical rootedness.<sup>26</sup> Most early studies pay too much attention to locality: community members must live together and talk to each other face-to-face. The sense of community, under this

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<sup>26</sup> Stephanie Riger and Paul J. Lavrakas, "Community Ties Patterns of Attachment and Social Interaction in Urban Neighborhoods", *American Journal of Community Psychology* 9 (1981): 55-66.

condition, is the strong feeling of belonging to groups within geographic boundaries.

Nevertheless, scholars later acknowledge that “relation” is an essential part of community, although geography still plays a significant role. Gusfield claims that there should be communities defined primarily according to relationships, such as a community of scholars in the same field sharing ideas but living in different parts of the world.<sup>27</sup> Using Bender’s ideas, Jones shifts the focus away from geography to relations as the core of communities. He argues that communities should be defined by their social networks, not their physical or geographical territories, and that focus on localities ignores, or even contradicts, the cultural implication of communities.<sup>28</sup>

Since then, community research has developed into articulating the specialty and types of relations, an area that is increasingly being called attention to. One perspective emphasizes the structure, marked by different levels of connectivity and intensity of relations: horizontal and hierarchical, bonding and bridging, weak and strong networks. Another stresses on normative values such as personal feelings, ideas and sense of community. In general, Taylor proposes that “community...means a group of people (1) who have beliefs and values in common, (2) whose relations are direct and many-sided and (3) who practise generalized as well as balanced reciprocity”<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph R. Gusfield, *The Community: A Critical Response* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975).

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1978).

<sup>29</sup> Michael Taylor, *The Possibility of Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 23.

These three components of a community are the social dimensions of a virtual community that, according to Baym, are affected by CMC's appropriating social resources and rules.<sup>30</sup> A widely used definition proposed by Rheingold, the creator of one early online community "The Well", defines virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace"<sup>31</sup>. Virtual communities have opened up a new social milieu where people share common interests, ideas, and feelings on sundry occasions without "showing up". Communities in this sense are no longer limited to villages and neighborhoods with concrete structures, but are now more related to social relations based on CMC, without which they could not have come into being, or would eventually dissolve. Formed by participants' communally "living together", a virtual community is the convergence of "electronically mediated social relationships built around enhanced community values"<sup>32</sup>. These two dimensions link CMC to social capital research into how it has transformed the components, features and dimensions of social capital.

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<sup>30</sup> Nancy K. Baym, "The Emergence of Online Community", in *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, ed. Steven G. Jones (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1998). Other terms that mean the same as "virtual community" include "virtual society", "cyber society", and "electronic community".

<sup>31</sup> Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Steve Woolgar, *Virtual Society?: Technology, Cyberbole, Reality*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, 2).



## **2.2.2 Influences of CMC on Social Capital**

The above discussions give the impression that a virtual community should be like a model, with CMC in the core, flanked by the dual environments of reality and virtuality that encourages debates. This section reviews the debates between two extremes on the social repercussions of virtual communication, by grouping relevant literature from a wide array of sources into three groups: resource accessibility variance, structural and cognitive changes of social networks, and collective action. By doing so, I hope to discover the approaches by which CMC affects social capital, inspiring the theoretical framework of mechanisms in China.

### **(1) Resource Accessibility Variance: Digital Divide**

Some argue that the over-reliance on personal digital knowledge and the unequal resource distribution among social actors give rise to a digital divide. On the one hand, resource distribution among social actors is unlikely to be completely fair, due to geographic, economic and political differences. On the other hand, social actors' skills in making use of CMC vary from each other. Nie's study finds that "Internet users compared to non-users report greater sociability and interconnectivity primarily because they are more educated, wealthier, and younger — not because they are Internet users"<sup>33</sup>. CMC, in this case, will cause harm within society, such as broadening the gaps between the haves and have-nots, the rich and poor, the educated and uneducated, the urban and rural.

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<sup>33</sup> Norman H. Nie, "Sociability, Interpersonal Relations, and the Internet: Reconciling Conflicting Findings", *American Behavioral Scientist* 45, 3 (2001): 429.

However, Lin challenges this perspective: the divide is inevitable and not caused by CMC *per se*; CMC does not narrow these gaps, but instead redistributes the resources between different social actors and “provide an equalizing opportunity in the access to social capital”<sup>34</sup>. Even more, people’s moving away from some offline activities is precisely the deconstruction of existing social ties, on which the networking ability of CMC builds. CMC must necessarily be different from real-life communication, and it requires participants to re-position themselves. Only then is a new networking society likely to emerge.

## **(2) Structural and Cognitive Changes of Social Networks**

Structuralism explains the recursive mechanisms of CMC by exploring how the redistribution of rules and resources changes structural aspect of social relations. Critics perceive that CMC is inexorably encroaching on the existing social landscape, when time consumption is considered. Putnam believes that online participation is not merely suboptimal but could even be harmful to vigorous civic engagement, because of the privatization of leisure time caused by the rapid development of the Internet, especially among the younger generation.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Nie thinks that CMC should be responsible for the “continuing decline of arenas for face-to-face relationships”<sup>36</sup>. Surely, some existing networks will be strengthened and new ties built by CMC, at the expense of old local networks. And new types of networks are always loose and

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<sup>34</sup> Nan Lin, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 227.

<sup>35</sup> Time, as a specific type of resource, according to Nie, can only be redistributed, yet not expanded. This means that spending time on one activity or interest must surely affect the time that could have been spent on another.

<sup>36</sup> Nie, 2001, 434.

weak. The problem here is that he has over-relied on face-to-face communication, mutual acquaintance and recognition, and neglected the importance of many other approaches through which people form connections.

More precisely, CMC is not the antithesis of civic engagement but part of people's daily life. It does not necessarily create or destroy social interaction. With regard to time consumption, anonymity in cyberspace makes shy people feel more comfortable to communicate. Also, people in certain types of occupations can work at home through online operations that allow them time with their families. The flexibility that people derive from CMC thus contributes to undermining external controls. According to Wellman, along with the routinization of CMC as one part of people's daily life, virtual contact — especially via email — complements social relations in person.<sup>37</sup> Many pundits in this camp claim that new types of relationships based on shared interests, ideas, and identity are in the formation, which Castells and Wellman describe as “networked individualism”<sup>38</sup>.

For individuals, new types of networks with diversity and ubiquitous connectivity enhance their capacity to get social support. Although turning individuals into more independent and separate figures, CMC is also weaving labyrinthine networks connecting them together. At the community level, they tend to transform

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<sup>37</sup> Wellman, 2002. He thinks that frequent use of email to contact relatives and friends does not create people's sense of community and social relations, but provides a new space for those already involved to be more active.

<sup>38</sup> Networked individualism, in Wellman and Castells' accounts, is a social pattern linking dispersed individuals with a variety of others, which as a result forms the basis of virtual communities.

“all-encompassing, social controlling communities” into networked societies where “boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, linkages switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies are flatter and more recursive”<sup>39</sup>.

Not only does CMC affect the structure of social relations, it also changes the quality of these relations. Nie argues that CMC is incapable of expressing important emotions with the same depth as face-to-face communication.<sup>40</sup> Whatever benign impacts CMC will bring cannot compensate for the declined social interaction caused by it. Similar findings are provided by Putnam’s discussion about trust, which encourages people to come together as group members.<sup>41</sup> But journeying through virtual communities undermines that very trust. The problem in this perspective is that, being just one indicator of social capital, trust is not always the most important value affecting the quality of social relations. Besides, trust plays a different role, or rather, social interactions have different foci in different social contexts.

Advocates devote more to the creation of online social identities. One trait of CMC, which is acorporal in nature, as Smith argues, shares many of the characteristics of real interaction but differs from it in its possibility to keep participants away from the stigma of social identity, thereafter, freeing them to recreate their own identities.<sup>42</sup>

The importance of rethinking about oneself and rebuilding one’s identity lies in the

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<sup>39</sup> Barry Wellman, “Physical Place and Cyberspace: the Rise of Personalized Networking”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25 (2001): 227.

<sup>40</sup> Nie, 2001, 432.

<sup>41</sup> Putnam, 1993, 2000.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, 1992.

possibility of molding a healthy conception of who we are. Everyone has multiple personal identities within society; as consumers, producers, students, men, women, children, parents, and self-governed citizens.<sup>43</sup> CMC offers rich opportunities for participants to explore and present their many selves, through homepage viewing, life experience sharing, joint artistic expression and political expression. That is exactly where collective identities and social relations come into being. In addition, online chatting and email exchanges with friends and relatives, and surfing the web for recreational purposes, are all associated with a general sense of community.<sup>44</sup>

### **(3) Collective Actions**

One significant implications of CMC in virtual communities is the provision of public goods for collective mobilization. These collective goods are especially important in increasingly individualized societies to form or maintain social connections, which were previously achieved only by the state or NGOs.<sup>45</sup> According to resource mobilization theory, this group of collective goods refers to available resources at hand through participants' networks, which are in accordance with personal interests.<sup>46</sup> In social psychology theory, these collective goods are only employable when participants have achieved shared values.<sup>47</sup> This section combines the two. In

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<sup>43</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Stephen Coleman, and Jay G. Blumier, *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy*, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Wellman, 2002; Castells, 2001; Turkle, 1995.

<sup>45</sup> W. Lance Bennet, and Amoshaun Toft, "Identity, technology, and narratives: transnational activism and social networks", in *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, edited by Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard (London; New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>46</sup> Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

<sup>47</sup> Caroline Kelly and Sara Breinlinger, *The Social Psychology of Collective Action: Identity, Injustice and Gender* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996).

general, according to Van de Donk et al., Internet-based collective action does not replace offline protests, but instead,

The use of the Internet affects the internal structure of social movement organizations, above all the density and direction of their links ... there is ample evidence that ICTs are conducive to forging (temporary) alliances and coalitions, both vertical and horizontal, across different movements.<sup>48</sup>

Both Van de Donk and Tilly highlight the importance of group size and admit that online activists are important in forming social relations and shared identity. Further, McCaughey and Ayers argue that the speed of Internet-based protests is made possible by CMC's ability to connect dispersive individuals from both marginal groups and activist groups into macro-level networks.<sup>49</sup> But their attention has been focused on recording the structure, strength and power of networks online to show that CMC has changed existing social relations, with great variation. Little has been done to explore how these networks in the qualitative sense affect the possibility and ways of collective mobilization. In the next section, I turn to the dynamics of constructing social capital through CMC in a theoretical account.

### **2.3 CMC and Social Capital in China**

Along with the rapid growth rate of Internet technology since China's official establishment of the World Wide Web in 1994, there has been a succession of

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<sup>48</sup> Van de Donk et al., "Introduction: Social Movements and ICTs", in *Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens and Social Movements*, edited by Wim Van de Donk et al. (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), 19.

<sup>49</sup> Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers, *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

scholarly researches on its social and political implications. This section has therefore deduced the following propositions concerning the detailed process of them.

### **2.3.1 Decentralization Through CMC**

Inspired by the ideas from Jonathan Bach and David Stark<sup>50</sup>, Yang rightly broaches that Chinese civil society and the Internet interact in a co-evolutionary way. To be precise, the Internet on the one hand functions as an instrument for the government to get public opinions and legitimize its institutions and, on the other, allows citizens to express their perspectives and challenge institutional deficiency. In studying intellectual web sites and interviewing *Minjian* (unofficial, private) writers<sup>51</sup>, Zhou also agrees that involvement in cyberspace has contributed dramatically to the expansion of civil society. Yet, he has reservations on its democratic appeal since “the state has taken the initiative in entering cyberspace by enlisting cooperation from intellectual establishments, as shown by the case of Century China”<sup>52</sup>.

This speculation is well corroborated in Tai’s work from a media perspective. In his account, the highly centralized state power and national focus of modernization in China has resulted in “compliance ideology”. Most political practices, seemingly dressed as “democratic”, are actually a function of elites’ political ideas or commitment to achieve political performance. They are designed to veil citizens in

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<sup>50</sup> See his discourse analysis of “Strengthening the Nation Forum”. <[www.hxzq.net](http://www.hxzq.net)>.

<sup>51</sup> By comparing the impact telegraphy had on national politics in Qing dynasty with that of the Internet, he focuses on the progress creating a new public sphere – a sphere under refined control – for rational discussion.

<sup>52</sup> Zhou Yongming, *Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 179.

pseudo image and to divert public attention, which has resulted in pervasive public distrust. According to him, this distrust in institutions and communities makes it a challenge to get people to collaborate outside the family. But he finds that the economic liberalization, social structure transformation and mass media marketization have changed the role of media in civil society. This is especially so, considering that the Internet is “an empowering tool for Chinese civil society” by creating a brand-new social space for civic life.

Additionally, according to Zheng, in an authoritarian society that lacks the rule of law and well-established institutions, and where citizens are pressed by intense state control, the Internet is the mediator between state and society. It is the crux for creating and maintaining social cohesion and institutional success. In China,

Political reform was to be initiated from the top and managed by the leadership. Leadership somehow encouraged social groups to engage in heated debates about political reform, but it did not allow social discourse on political reform to become a public discourse, let alone to affect the leadership’s decision making.<sup>53</sup>

The Internet has provided “the agent and the platform” for the citizens to “voice their grievances” and “transform grievances into collection”, especially for these lacking alternative strategies. Historically, the accumulation of social capital in China has encountered various political barriers, especially that from state power, although Chinese society has cultivated many aspiring intellectuals and diverse social organizations.

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<sup>53</sup> Zheng Yongnian, *Technological empowerment: the Internet, state and society in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 25.



People may wonder why decentralization is so important. One answer is that political decentralization caused by socioeconomic changes, one of which is the marketization of mass media, “have provided a fertile ground for many voluntary, informal mass organizations, which are originally intended to fill the void of the social functions of work units and government-sanctioned organizations”<sup>54</sup>. The emergence of informal organizations is likely to transform resource distribution between social actors.<sup>55</sup> To be more accurate, some people may gain access to, while others lose control over, certain resources; thereafter, the usage of particular resources for a given purpose will also be changed. As a result, there is no resource monopoly and authoritarian system.

### **2.3.2 Rebuilding Social Relations Through CMC**

The redistribution of social resources, as a result or the manifestation of political decentralization, tends to change the structure and content of social relations among users. Structurally, the digital divide based on education, knowledge and social awareness could change homophilous social networks to heterophilous ones, and vice versa: people with similar power positions may differ in social knowledge.<sup>56</sup> Besides, being a member of a certain virtual community sometimes helps someone to build a weak connection, for instance, a lurker could become familiar with people whose posts he always views. Moreover, online relations could dislocate offline hierarchies.

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<sup>54</sup> Chen Jie and Lu Chunlong, “Social Capital in Urban China: Attitudinal and Behavioral Effects on Grassroots Self-Government” (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 31, Philadelphia, USA, 2006), 6.

<sup>55</sup> Resource such as social status is a crucial factor in civic engagement. By assessing materials on how people from different families wish others happy new year, Bian Yanjie makes the statement that everyone tends to do that to people from the same social class. By interpreting the empirical data from a survey of urban population’s social networks, Zhang emphasizes the importance of social status in urban China.

<sup>56</sup> Kalathil, 2003.

In cyber-networks, the hierarchical relationships are not as powerful as before, since online activism is growing at such a high rate that the government can no longer dominate in state-society communication and interaction.

Meanwhile, the basis or the content of these relations are also undergoing transformation. As mentioned, the flourishing of ICTs increases public distrust in governments and institutions, because of the increasing exposure of institutional scandals, especially that of corruption. In fact, this increasing distrust is not caused by CMC, but by institutional inefficiency, inequality and governmental corruption, where CMC can serve as the palliative albeit at an incipient stage. In practice, this distrust could be a driving force for an institutional revolution under the circumstances of weak institutions and deficient civic culture.

CMC in China emerged along with “Chinese modernity”, one instant consequence of which is identity crises. This identity crisis in China has much to do with state nationalism, used by the state to maintain the society’s obedience to institutions and government policies.<sup>57</sup> During the demonstrations against America in 1999, Japanese businesses in 2005, and the boycott of French products in 2008, the Chinese people

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<sup>57</sup> There are mainly two types of nationalism in recent China, both promoters of costly and uncontrollable collective actions. One is anti-West sentiment, and the other is anti-Japanese nationalism, both of which are deeply rooted in historical resentment since the first Opium War in 1840. In the first category, the major motivator is the imagined or real humiliation from the West. For instance, the nationwide indignation and self-organized demonstration against America’s bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on May 8, 1999. Recently, the criticism of Western prejudice and unfair reports on anti-government protests in Tibet during the 2008 Olympic Torch Relay also caused particular ire in China, as did the nationwide boycott of French product because of the obstruction encountered in Paris. To the second, the national demonstration against Japanese business in many cities broke out in 2005, as a result of Chinese people’s anger over Japan’s negation of wartime crimes, the annual pilgrimages of Japanese prime minister to Yasukuni Shrine in commemorating the criminals of World War II, and the falsification in Japan of its history textbooks.

shared a high degree of social identity and connectedness. For years, this type of commitment to a specific political authority underlined the sense of belonging to a sovereign entity, but undermined the sense of citizenship. Thus, stressing on individual creativity and freedom, “online activism is thus also an identity movement, expressed as yearnings and struggles for social recognition, personal dignity, and a sense of community”<sup>58</sup>. From experiences online, Chinese citizens are now extremely eager to communicate with their fellow countrymen to rebuild their social identity.

### **2.3.3 Mobilizing Collective Actions Through CMC**

This part is devoted to how mobilization starts and ends in authoritarian regimes, the process of which turns CMC into political communication. Zheng discusses how interaction strategies matter in carrying out Internet-based collective actions, following Hirschman’s categorization of Internet activities into “exit”, “voice”, and “loyalty”<sup>59</sup>, and finds “the ‘voice’ acceptable to both the state and society”<sup>60</sup>. Simply put, it is because in authoritarian China, any collective action beyond state control is unlikely to succeed.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, this approach focuses on the power of CMC in response to state manipulation. However, there are occasions when state organizations are not the principal driving force in collective action for common interests. Hence,

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<sup>58</sup> Yang, 2009, 218.

<sup>59</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Response to decline in Firms, organizations, and State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

<sup>60</sup> Zheng, 2007, 165.

<sup>61</sup> Zheng claims that “Due to the authoritarian nature of the Chinese political system, whether a given Internet-based social movement will succeed or not is largely dependent on how the state views that social movement”, in *Technological Empowerment*, p136. The associational landscape in pre-Internet China also suggests that only associations supportive of the authoritarian regime and in line with state stance can exist and gain official support. Others in opposition to regime authority will only suffer from stringent control. The development of informal organizations in China is still rigorously manipulated by the state. But CMC at least provides citizens the opportunity with which to access resources and form relationships.

alternatives stem from Internet businesses and community members' utopian impulse: two aspects of Yang's multi-interactionism.

For Yang, the logic of running Internet businesses is based on "web traffic" and "contentious activities" which implicates the synergy between online activism and Internet business.<sup>62</sup> Adopting market strategies to achieve collective interests therefore imputes Internet business a social character. In other words, the practices of media commercialization, aiming at burgeoning virtual communities and gaining economic interests, are actually a form of social production, which "also challenge the logic market and proprietary market-centered economic production"<sup>63</sup>. Hitherto, the economic traits of CMC can also help promote collective actions. Subsequently, Yang studies the historical development, participants' imagination and feeling of CMC. He concludes that although having emerged due to people's desire for connection, CMC affords people an approach through which they also attempt to put collectively imaged new values into practice.<sup>64</sup> However, similar to other pieces, discussions about CMC in China have focused on NGOs or informal associations.<sup>65</sup>

Virtual community, as one form of online existence, shares the social features of both community and CMC, marking an adaptation in civic engagement to fit the changing

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<sup>62</sup> Yang, 2009, 15.

<sup>63</sup> Yang, 2009, 124.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 184. But he does not discuss the complex relationships formed among community members. CMC, as defined, can only take place between two or more members, but cannot exert power on the social landscape without the relational facet.

<sup>65</sup> It is true that the Internet offers traditional NGOs new opportunities to expand their scope and strengthen their influences; some virtual communities have also set up their own civic associations. But this is not the primary focus of this new media in transforming social landscape in contemporary China.

participatory demands. Although Liu has done an ethnographic study on the *Tianya* Community — the participants, community rules, online activities and emotional feelings after participation<sup>66</sup> — as Yang and many other Chinese scholars have commented, “her analysis focuses purely on the internal feature of online communities without linking them to the broader social context”, which makes her book merely a guidebook to *Tianya*. How the formation of social capital takes place on account of virtual discourses is still ambiguous.

## **2.4 The Theoretical Framework of Mechanisms**

Based on the above analyses, this section claims with confidence that the ability of CMC to decentralize political power in resource distribution, to falter in both the physical and relational boundaries, and to lubricate the achievement of shared goals, provides impetus to social capital formation. Three hypotheses can be generalized: (1) resources are redistributed through CMC as a result of power decentralization; (2) individuals’ use of these redistributed resources affects social relations and values; and (3) resources embedded in social relations sharing certain values can be mobilized for action.<sup>67</sup>

Firstly, CMC in virtual communities such as *Tianya* incorporates a process of decentralization, presenting unprecedented convenience, flexibility, profundity, and

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<sup>66</sup> Liu Jun, “A Holistic Network Approach to the Study of the Social Support Network in Village Fa-The Blockmodel and Its Application”, *She Hui (Society)* 3, 26 (2005): 69-80.

<sup>67</sup> It is based on Lin’s theoretical framework and meticulous exposition in understanding how cybernetworks help to “recruit, train, retain, and mobilize followers and create collective social capital”, e.g., China’s “Falun Gong” social movement.

openness in common parlance. But it cannot be superficially read as necessarily leading to the downfall of this authoritarian regime. Instead, this decentralization does not preclude the possibility of manipulation, which is perhaps ingrained in Chinese culture. Thus, it is important also to know the extent to which resource distribution is decentralized and the probable confines to individuals' accessing of social resources.

To articulate the process in detail, collective usage of resources is divided into two types: the creation of new resources, and the employment of existing resources. In creation, a subconscious cognition of viewing oneself as a member of the community gives impetus to the formation of networks. For the government, active involvement in online activities should be the foci of their effort for economic benefit and social support. In the work sphere, getting an overview of what is going on in the country or around the world, and keeping abreast of the times, are the main purposes. It is indispensable in network building and may have significant spillover effects in real life. In terms of the amount of effort one might put into, and the position one might set in the flow chain, in real life, the use of resources could be considered along a continuum. At both ends of the continuum are creation and employment of resources respectively.

The second aspect is about what happened to social relations as a result of resource redistribution. With the transformation of political system, the dying of collectivism (*ji ti zhu yi*), and the flourishing of western liberalism, Chinese people are now

experiencing an identity crisis and CMC thus becomes inevitable in causing a revival of individualism.<sup>68</sup> Although a debate exists as to whether the state should supervise individuals' activities for the sake of the collectivity, individualism is perceived to protect individual liberty and creativity. In practice, *Tianya* is inclusive to Chinese citizens. And the principle — that the resources available for individuals in virtual communities to interact with others will not decrease — sustains this inclusiveness. This is also reflected in the forum's tolerance to netizens' creative ways of involvement, including culture jamming (*e gao*).<sup>69</sup>

But individualism does not mean doing things on one's own. Instead, the advantage of community interaction is that it provides collective goods that individuals cannot provide for themselves. Emancipated from physical identity and given the opportunities to create individuality, people also become uncertain of the social environment surrounding them. Thus, they will try to find some relationship to escape the isolation. Any individualized person would not commit himself to a particular group or choose to abide by the group's rules if being in that group does not offer them more benefit than acting alone. Likewise, a group would not form if it could do nothing more than what individuals are likely to achieve on their own. In short, it is

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<sup>68</sup> Civic education in China after 1949 emphasized that individualism is a bad thing. Especially after the "Anti-rightist Campaign" in 1957, Zhou Yang, the head of Literary and Art Circles, said, "In the socialist society, individualism is the root of evil". In the long run, an ingrained "subject" culture has quenched the development of citizenship and civic awareness.

<sup>69</sup> "Culture jamming sometimes entails transforming mass media to produce ironic or satirical commentary about itself, using the original medium's communication method. Culture jamming is usually employed in opposition to a perceived appropriation of public space, or as a reaction against social conformity." Accessed February 1, 2011. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture\\_jamming](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_jamming). In China, there is an increasing popularity of texts, music, videos sharing the features of *e gao*, most of which are just free and for fun. One example is the video named "The Bloody Case that Started from a Steamed Bun" made by a 31-year-old engineer Hu Ge, to satirize a widely known Chinese movie *The Promise* produced by illustrious director Chen Kaige. Hu Ge said that he made this video to express his dissatisfaction with the original movie, and not for any ambitious reason.

true that citizens have become more isolated recently because of economic, especially technological development, and yet at the same time, they have become more connected to each other.

The underlying relations are categorized into two types based on the structures: homophilous and heterophilous. Simply put, homophilous can be manifested by the relationships within non-activists and activists; while heterophilous can be manifested by the relationships between non-activists and activists. In practice, online activists always struggle to resist the preexisting ideological control designed by the government.<sup>70</sup> For ordinary citizens, therefore, the relationships or contacts with these activists can be very beneficial. It is the articulation of the Chinese people's new identity and social networks. Without specific institutions, rules or organizations, the mobilization for collective action through CMC relies heavily on these activists, particularly the innovative methods they use to fight an increasing level of censorship.

Thirdly, different social actors' use of resources embedded in both homophilous and heterophilous relations appreciate distinctive ways of mobilization. Compared to traditional mobilization for participation in election, meeting and decision-making, virtual mobilization costs less and is difficult to cover up. Anyone may choose to participate freely, without worrying about being finger-pointed or blamed by others.

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<sup>70</sup> CMC gave rise to a "new opinion stratum" as Zhou Ruijin – a well-known political commentator and former deputy chief editor of the People's Daily – proposed in early 2009. In "Glad to See the Rise of 'New Opinion Stratum'". Online at [http://epaper.oeeee.com/A/html/2009-01/02/content\\_675368.htm](http://epaper.oeeee.com/A/html/2009-01/02/content_675368.htm). Accessed October 26, 2010.



The anonymity helps liberate individuals from their social labels and social responsibility.<sup>71</sup> The emphasis on individualism also provides a good excuse to be away from collective actions that are more likely to destroy this limited safety.

But CMC on certain topics is also characterized by its rapidity in fading from both internal (such as a decline in discussion enthusiasm) and external factors. Therefore, most ordinary netizens need a reason or motivation initially to participate, and subsequently to maintain their passion. In detail, online mobilization through dispersive networks can be achieved by three elements: collective identity, group leadership and social environment. Each element works for particular purposes but does not overstep the pursuit of profits: netizens' aggregate participation to gain recognition, reputation and connectedness; businesses' promotion for economic profit and popularity; and the government's intervention to assimilate new social groups into its political system and enhance its political legitimacy. These ambitions and behaviors mobilize actors with weak or strong ties to participate in the same issue.

The aforementioned three aspects are the main mechanisms in this paper that are tested in Chapter 4 based on empirical qualitative data. For purposes of this paper, the social capital formed through CMC depends, not on any one of the three patterns, but on the equilibrium among them. Chapter 3 depicts a "concrete" community — *Tianya*, its financial support, technological structure, software design, participants,

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<sup>71</sup> Theoretical and empirical evidences suggest that the anonymity of online participation actually decreases participants' sense of belonging to a group of community, and leads to a more isolated end.

community law and rules, and participatory purposes. From the above analyses, it is clear that a virtual community functions similar to a communication model, supported by these “material” components.

## Chapter 3

### *Tianya Virtual Community*

In March 1999, *Tianya* was set up in Hainan province — a remote corner of China, far from Beijing — catalyzed by the Chinese people’s strong indignation at the U.S.-led NATO’s barbaric attack on the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia. Today, *Tianya* remains one of the most popular (out of thousands of online forums) for its down-to-earth style, humane environment, and inclusiveness.<sup>72</sup> It has attracted more than 43 million registered members,<sup>73</sup> and is becoming an online home for Chinese all over the world as originally designed in the slogan “A bosom friend afar brings a distant land near”. The introduction of *Tianya* boldly states:

At present, *Tianya* covers more than 100 million users of quality monthly and have about 32 million registered users. Tens of millions of user groups of high quality and loyalty produce super popularity, cultural experiences and interactive original content. It positions netizens at the center, and tries the best to satisfy multiple demands such as personal communication, expression and creation. As a result, it forms both online and offline trust and interactive culture among worldwide Chinese, and becomes the leading focal platform of Internet issues and personages in the Mandarin Circle.<sup>74</sup>

*Tianya* was founded with the intention of building trust and a close relationship among geographically distant individuals and groups. As a *Tianyaer* with a 10-year experience said:

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<sup>72</sup> According to Alexa Internet, *Tianya* is currently the 15<sup>th</sup> most visited site in China and the 95<sup>th</sup> worldwide.

<sup>73</sup> This numbers is about half of the population of China’s most populous province Henan. According to the latest National Population Census of China in 2000, the most populous province is Heinan, with a population of more than 96 million. *Tianya*’s population increases by 11780 everyday, online at <http://www.tianya.cn/>, accessed May 14 to October 10, 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Online at <http://help.tianya.cn/about/about.html>. Accessed August 27, 2010.

Although some fellow *Tianyaers* disappointed or even made use of me, which directly led to my inactivity in that sub-community, I did not leave *Tianya*. Because of its humanity and my strong sense of belonging, I find it hard for me to live without it. None of other virtual communities in China can satisfy me. Recently, I have been trying to get involved in another sub-community of *Tianya*.

During its 11-year evolution, *Tianya's* financial support, structure, basic rules, participants and community tenets have changed tremendously, which may have played a part in continuous social transformation. Understanding changes in technology and community building can contribute much to the analysis of social capital constructing, which is produced by these changes. This could explain *Tianya's* success in the virtual world despite its transient population.

### **3.1 Financial Support for *Tianya***

To an enormous extent, the source of financial support always determines the political feature of an organization, especially a typical Chinese virtual community that requires a huge sum of money to sustain itself.<sup>75</sup> The outstanding feature of *Tianya's* economic foundation is its independence from government support and necessitated by the free market economy. In 1999, three individuals, including the present CEO (Xing Ming), invested twenty millions Chinese *yuan* in *Tianya* Virtual Community. In 2001, the two other individuals withdrew their investment, after which Xing Ming continued to operate the company alone, using money made from the stock market. From 2001 to 2004, because of a lackluster Internet economy and regional limitations,

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<sup>75</sup> The dependence of NGOs on the government financial support in China determines their political dependence on the government, or their irresistibility to government manipulation.

*Tianya* Virtual Community was virtually shelved and Xing himself thought of quitting.<sup>76</sup> Surprisingly, the humanistic environment and freedom which participants enjoyed from *Tianya* helped it to regain ground and gave Xing the impetus to continue.

Since 2004, venture capital has increased drastically to support *Tianya*'s development. Unlike other commercial websites or virtual communities, advertisement investment in *Tianya* turned to failure. As many *Tianyans* said, they were attracted to *Tianya* because of its plain layout and pure communication environment with minimal advertisements. Its community finance now relies mainly on personal value-added services, supplemented by advertisement. That could explain why this community is user-friendly and enjoys a relatively higher level of speech freedom and public popularity.

### **3.2 The Structure of *Tianya***

As discussed in Chapter 2, community size will affect participants' activities and even determine the success or failure of the community. As it develops, *Tianya* continues to develop diverse sub-communities, which is further categorized; unfortunately, this convenience and humanity becomes a problem. Generally, the management decided on 10 sub-communities in terms of community functions, individual interests and technological differences (see Table 3.1). Measured by the number of posts, degree of

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<sup>76</sup> As Xing Ming said, there were only three employees during that period.

interactivity and popularity, the hottest sub-community is *Tianya Forum*, which has 10 columns. The main column is called “*Tianya Zhuban*” (*Tianya main column*), which includes about 70 sub-columns covering multifarious topics on economic development, literature writing, traveling, legal advice, cuisines, sports, entertainment and so on, to satisfy netizens’ daily requirement. The most popular column is “*Tianya Zatan*”, which has no specific focus.<sup>77</sup>

Table 3.1 The Structure of *Tianya* Community

Sections	Columns	Theme and main activities
Forum	Main column	Issues such as social news, economy, photography, gossip, love, and so on.
	Cities	Divided into 35 columns based on China’s real administrative division: 24 provinces, four municipalities, five autonomous regions and two special administrative regions.
	Traveling	Food, transportation, scenery, culture, living habit and so on, in places where people travel.
	Professionals	Information about different kinds of jobs, salary requirements, dilemmas, relationships, etc.
	University life	Studying, living and love in the universities, youth literature, campus songs and other memories.
	Overseas	Living in other countries, mostly about love, education, work, family, etc.
	Backyard	Diverse ways of recreation and entertainment such as Story Solitaire, enjoy music, etc.
	Online stories	Amateur writers share their work with other netizens.
	Brand life	Famous brands of clothes, shoes, hotels, cosmetics.
Blog		A sub-community for people to share personal feelings and perspectives in the form of blogs.
Lai Bar		A social networking point for the fashionable men and women.
Q&A		A place to ask questions or to provide answers.
Games		Personal experience playing games.

<sup>77</sup> The popularity is determined by the number of posts, clicking frequency, public’s attention, etc. Online at <http://www.tianya.cn/bbs/index.shtml>, accessed March 25, 2010.

Brands		Companies publicizing famous brands.
Shopping		Information on discounts or promotions for all kinds of products.
Photo album		Sharing pictures with fellow netizens, participating in online photographing competition.
Music		Recommending others' or sharing self-made music.
Classified info.		Communication with others about things people see in their daily lives.
Pocket <i>Tianya</i>		Information on using cell phones to access <i>Tianya</i> .

As a convergence of non-kin social networks, CMC in *Tianya Zatan* is able to build connections among people with shared interests or perspectives. Married persons tend to gravitate to similar others to discuss marriage, their husbands/wives and children. They are more likely to criticize or take collective actions, for example, against companies selling inferior milk powder and hospitals using unqualified medicines for children. Forming connections may not have been the original purpose in establishing *Tianya*, but this has turned out to be the most significant consequence. It is logical to assume that the more diverse the means of CMC, the more likely one is able to build social ties. Table 3.1 provides a collection of ways for communication, including text, image, video and many other uses of software. Admittedly, not everyone welcomes this categorization, as can be seen in the number of supporters and critics. Each sub-community has developed its own specific atmosphere and internal small circles.

### 3.3 Participants

As the fundamental and outstanding characteristics of online text, decentrality does not mean fully horizontal relations and equal positions. In fact, text itself is static and

discursive without subjective ambitions. That is exactly where the subject — netizens — can play a role. People are the pulse of the community in providing peer-to-peer interaction and activating static resources. Once the identities of these participants are considered, it is inevitable that the stratification of human beings in social structure will have certain reflections in *Tianya*. Taking into account the features of community power and responsibility, this paper categorizes *Tianyaers* into three groups: (1) moderators (*ban zhu*), (2) active participants (*huoyue fenzi*), and (3) ordinary members and lurkers. But it should be cautioned that there is no clear-cut boundary between these three groups. The company assigns a web master (*zhan zhang*) to take charge of the community. This paper does not examine the web master's role, as s/he rarely gets involved in online conversations.

### **3.3.1 Moderator (*ban zhu*)**

There are many ways in which individuals could become a moderator: they could be elected by ordinary members, nominated by ordinary members but decided on by the webmaster, invited by the community from external resources, assigned by the holding company, or even specifically named by the government. Thus, the identity of these moderators could be ordinary netizens, company employees, or government officials.<sup>78</sup> This constitution paves the way for resource exchange and cyber-hierarchy formation.

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<sup>78</sup> The participation of government officials in online conversations is particularly important to ensure resource and position diversity. Many government officials I interviewed admitted that online public opinions had already become one of the most important channels for them to make decisions on public policies and direct communication with non-officials turned out to be beneficial for mutual understanding.



Moderators have a greater responsibility than ordinary members, while enjoying more freedom and “rights” in some aspects, with changes as the community develops. Accordingly, moderators may choose whether to participate, their primary role being to read others’ posts to ensure appropriateness; to delete posts, block IDs or even shut down sub-communities when necessary; but they have to take care when responding to complaints and accusations. In a word, responsibility and rights are relative:

We moderators have to behave more neutrally, controlling personal emotions and avoiding being extremists. Most thorny is how to trade off between publicity and community development since the two are occasionally contradictory. (Interviewee 2)

The moderators I interviewed perceive themselves as mediators between the central authority and the public, being partners, rather than opponents, to both. In this sense, moderators rank higher in community power and closer to better resources than ordinary participants; to some extent, they tend to be higher in heterophilous social networks. In this case, moderators always impose self-censorship for political leverage: getting support from, or at least not being punished by, the state, at the same time pushing social issues further up or down the agenda. Without them, *Tianya* will run into chaos immediately.

Being a moderator is sometimes boring, unrewarding and troublesome, yet it requires great enthusiasm and skill. To safeguard a healthy and vibrant environment, moderators should know how to prevent flaming and spam, to control potentially libelous, radical and provocative conversations within a certain limit, to answer FAQs

(Frequently Asked Questions) concerning software or content, and help ordinary people to disseminate news when necessary. More specifically, in order to create or maintain the popularity of the not-so-active columns, moderators are required to generate topics, lead discussions and invigorate the interaction; while in the exceedingly active ones, they should strive to keep discussions relevant and orderly, using specific pieces of software and management skills. To keep *Tianya* away from the danger of being shut down by the government for politically subversive conversations, moderators should keep a close eye on all posts and learn to effectively use the filtering system.

### **3.3.2 Active Participants (*huoyue fenzi*)**

Internet activists, including professionals, scholars, media workers, writers, artists and well-educated freelancers, comprise the all-important part of the online intellectual community. This group has extensive knowledge on a multitude of social issues, and can analyze from multifarious angles. Features to distinguish online activists from non-activists include the number of posts, virtual scores, participating frequencies, number of followers and political awareness. Although many community members have utilized the community to solve all kinds of problems, a substantial number of participants, especially these activists, engaged to change things, in *Tianya* or even the whole Chinese society. They use invisible “pens” — keyboard and mouse — to gain power and respect, although not powerful enough as offline activists. Compared to moderators, activists are ordinary netizens beyond the control of the media

company, thus they are not required to make neutral comments and monitor online behavior; compared to ordinary members, they are able to form tenuous but uncontrollable online alliances with their fellows.

They could be ordinary people (for instance, businessman, high school teachers, freelancers) or in high positions in the political hierarchy (for instance, police inspectors). While those in positions have more access to social resources to engage in online activities, their cyber-power and reputation is based on their contributions to the community, such as any help they provide to increase public security. This is the distinction between moderators and online activists, in terms of cyber-hierarchy.

The principle that responsibility and rights are relative also holds true here. Compared to ordinary members, activists have to be more careful in their daily operations. Voicing personal opinions on social issues in virtual communities is a private business but highly related to and strictly monitored by the public. The willingness to take responsibility in personal behaviors online, in most circumstances, makes activists more popular and trustworthy. Eventually, they are likely to be chosen as leaders of certain Internet-initiated collective actions, which then generates them “fans”. In this sense, moderators and online activists are not exclusive to each other.

### 3.3.3 Ordinary Members and Lurkers

It seems that, compared to the above two high-status groups, ordinary members have much less power and influence in *Tianya*. They log in or click on the link of *Tianya* once a week, month or even a year, as they wish. They may be long-time observers or bystanders, newbies watching from the sideline, or former activists that have “retired” because of unpleasant experiences. But their potential influence should not be underestimated, especially in the event of emergencies. For instance, according to official reports, the Sichuan earthquake occurred on May 12, 2008 at 2:20 p.m. The first post informing about the earthquake was made by an ordinary netizen at 2:30 p.m.; as the poster said, the post was made at 2:29 p.m. but was initially rejected without being categorized by the type of post.<sup>79</sup> Immediately after that, people throughout China and around the world got to know about the disaster, began to collect information online or through real-life channels, called their families and friends, posted updates, wrote to pray for the victims, and even went to the disaster site to help in the search and rescue. The country was shocked by the event, and reports on it pervaded the entire world.

Beyond government efforts, numerous posts calling for volunteers to organize rescue teams and go to quake-ravaged areas to help Sichuan people also emerged throughout *Tianya*. It was the mass effort in spreading resources that made nationwide or even worldwide awareness and participation possible. Although many requests had not

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<sup>79</sup> “Serious Earthquake!!!”. Online at <http://www.xcar.com.cn/bbs/viewthread.php?tid=7554567&extra=&page=1>. Accessed March 3, 2010.

been converted to action, their effort was still considered great progress in the history of human coordination. Many netizens went offline and cooperated with strangers to help the victims. Being activist or not was no longer their consideration.

The spillover effect of these netizens' participation to real life was unpredictable, which is also possible for the other two groups of participants. Ordinary members of *Tianya* may be active participants in another virtual community or real-life social circles. Their sharing of resource, obtained from *Tianya*, when acting as lurkers or normal netizens might be efficacious in their social networks outside *Tianya*. In return, that could result in an increase in the lurkers' confidence and their friends' interest in *Tianya*. A simple example is from a Tai Chi enthusiast's experience:

I posted my cell phone number in my posts discussing the skills and benefits of Tai Chi, and a great number of *Tianyans* communicated with me in my post and someone even contacted me via cell phone or video. Most of them I knew before because we talked a lot in my post. But the interesting thing is that several of them are total strangers that I have never seen and talked online. But I don't know, and don't care.

### **3.4 Software**

Software is the technological basis of CMC and participants' digital skills. Knowledge of software and the ability to use it determines, to some degree, who are the participants, the depth of their interaction, to what extent their lives will be affected, and what and how they can contribute to the community. Practical experience explains that some people leave the community because of their inability to use some basic software smoothly. In *Tianya Zatan*, a text-based forum, software

requirement is not rigid, and people with basic knowledge about computers and typing can use it.

For ordinary *Tianyaers*, the importance of software lies in its ability to facilitate their online behavior, especially to participate in designing and improving *Tianya*. As for moderators, it touches on more aspects: (1) attract certain groups of people, and keep others out of the door — forbid their registrations or block their existing IDs — such as the virtual reputation indicators through the system of rewards and punishment; (2) reduce moderators' administrative burden, for instance, by distinguishing new posts from old ones by colors or flags attached to posts; and (3) help moderators to conform to government censorship, for example, the software filtering sensitive and offensive words and phrases.

Although far from perfect, software in *Tianya* with the above features has constructed its material infrastructure, and is welcomed by Chinese netizens. As one interviewee noted, after comparing hundreds of communities, the layout and simplicity of these applications made him decide to stay. However, to enthrall participants, to promote and sustain involvement, the community's purposes, content, rules and many other substantial aspects are still the foundations. The virtual community of the future will depend not just on how the technology or the software produced by it evolves, but also on how participants learn and use their knowledge to improve and reinvent community software or its technological structure.

### 3.5 Community Law and Rules

As with institutions and laws within a nation, there are rules and law in *Tianya*. The community also needs these to manage participants' behavior, participants need them to decide what they can and cannot do, and the state needs them to regulate the community and participants, so as to preserve state power and social stability. Netizens' behavior is restrained by these rules and law from the very beginning to the end of their cyber-lives. *Tianya* has its common rules as with other communities, and every column has its own specific rules, which determine political opportunities and constraints of resource exchange and network building. These rules are interpreted via three aspects: registration and management, security and intellectual property, and netiquette.

Official rules of ID registration and management in *Tianya* were launched late in June 2000. Without registering as members, individuals are only allowed to read posts as a guest in *Tianya*, which would satisfy a portion of participants. Registration is required for those that want to post. *Tianya* can remove a member's ID if s/he does not post with his ID and logs in less than five times within a three-month period following registration. This is to encourage participation by registered members. Aside from violating community rules, conditions under which IDs can be removed include: (1) when one's behavior violates national law and regulations; (2) when one attacks, humiliates, or provokes others deliberately; or (3) when one registers under a name of an influential social figure.

As the community develops and the number of community members increases, the management and controls also tighten, including new rules like the post review system. The relatively free CMC in *Tianya* is thus gradually formalized. However, almost all the interviewees said they paid little attention to these general rules at the time of registration with *Tianya*. This could, however, be a crucial factor in generating conflicts among participants.

Although set up for non-commercial purposes, *Tianya* as a business entity should follow the market principles to survive or use these principles for its own purposes in this marketization era. In this aspect, rules are mainly for the participants' security and intellectual property purposes. For instance, copyright protection rules (CPRs) are paramount, since CMC is mostly cherished for the content that is easy to be copied, especially in a country lacking law protecting intellectual property rights. Especially for web writers, CPRs are the essentials of their virtual living.

Sub-communities have their own specific rules, which should be obeyed by ordinary members as well as moderators. Different from general rules, these specific ones are always cautiously obeyed by participants, otherwise the moderators or ordinary members have the option to censure. One moderator in the column "China Academy" was forced to leave for his violation of the specific rule: maintaining the neutrality of academic research. As explained by another moderator:



That moderator once copied a political post about Liu Kaibo, which triggered keen discussion in the column. The focus of the discussion is whether academic posts in our column should be politically neutral with no exception, and whether that moderator's behavior should be punished. Ultimately, he resigned.<sup>80</sup> (Interviewee 5)

### **3.6 Community Purpose: A Participatory Design**

One assumption for the legitimization of a virtual community or even the macro-level political system is that most members participate in civic activities. The community employs various strategies to encourage them to become involved. What the community projects outwardly thus determines who the members are, and what they can achieve. For *Tianya*, participatory design is seen as central to its development in fostering social integration. Its development is therefore both the means and the end. However, no matter what the community plans to realize, it ultimately depends on the participants. In this sense, addressing community-participants' interaction matters most in the community's social construction.

*Tianya* is doing well in being inclusive to the majority of the Chinese people, economically, politically and socially. On one hand, it is through the daily operations that people learn the spirit of cooperation, both consciously and subconsciously. It is impossible for people to take action by carefully calculating the costs and benefits all the time. Therefore, cooperation should not always be explained in terms of rationality. Everyone can share their opinions without worrying about his/her appearance and social labels. Even a former criminal would not be discriminated

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<sup>80</sup> Online at <http://www4.tianya.cn/new/techforum/content.asp?iditem=666&idarticle=7326>, Accessed October 12, 2010.

against, which is impossible in real-life communities. Thus, a strong sense of belonging in *Tianya* is understandable, especially in authoritarian China where the state has policed civic activities stringently since its onset.

At the community level, sub-communities in *Tianya* are divided on the basis of participants' age, gender, interest, and geographical position, between which no clear-cut boundary exists. It can therefore be read as participants' indirect involvement in community building. Although some discussions also show the dark side of CMC, such as speaking based on hearsay evidence and blindly following trends, the general trend of discussion is not merely noise or sentimental twaddle, leading to meaningless chaos as perceived. Rather, venting online is easy to attract similar moods and aggregate each other's ill humor because misery seeks company. Living in an environment greatly based on the market economy but with relatively weak religiosity, the Chinese have become vulnerable to the feelings of loneliness and selfishness. Online communities, then, emerge as places where participants can find themselves a role in society and acquire the feeling of inclusion they desire.<sup>81</sup>

More directly, *Tianya* establishes several other policies or measures for its sustainability. For instance, *Guantian Teahouse* launched an election of the Arbitration Committee on March 26, 2004, to decide committee members. In February 2006, it even made a significant political-related progress — “public

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<sup>81</sup> Schutz, William, *The Interpersonal Underworld* (Palo Alto, CA: Science & Behavior books, 1966).

nomination and election” of moderators. After that, another sub-community began to reorganize itself by encouraging all netizens to nominate candidates. But it turned out to be a public criticism of current moderators on their alleged malfeasance, personal morality and so on. Because of these efforts, *Tianya* became well known. Subsequently, famous Chinese writers accepted interview requests from *Tianya*, and jurists began to post articles in *Tianya* to expose real-life judicial scandals.

In this way, resources are redistributed and opportunities are offered to *Tianyaers* for engagement, whether observing as third parties, public posting and discussion, or private messaging.<sup>82</sup> In public communication, *Tianyaers*’ can: (1) Comment: express personal emotions and perspectives on certain issues; (2) Chat: just communicate with others without explicit objectives, or mainly to get rid of loneliness; (3) Abuse: separate oneself from a certain group, or more precisely, from the common identity of that group; (4) Oppose: gain recognition from his/her social circles; (5) Remonstrate: steadily adhere to his/her own ideas and the group identity; (6) Refuse: stop someone’s ascendance into power or protect one’s own rights; (7) Apply: get a higher position in community, such as being a moderator; (8) Consult: make clear about the problems one cares both online and offline; (9) Complain: against someone or some policies.

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<sup>82</sup> For some waverers, getting lost in *Tianya* will result in two directions: (1) Find their way through mutual empowerment; or (2) Leave it as a result of failure in accessing useful information. It depends on the attractiveness of community design and participants’ interest and capability. Some of these who stayed have more or less engagement in the community participatory design.

Often, conversations in the public sphere is not enough to satisfy some netizens; for instance, there may be important, but sensitive, information that people want to share with others, or someone wants to get closer to another person in private. Under these circumstances, private messaging is needed. For convenience, some people choose to exchange their QQ numbers, MSN or email addresses. When two persons or groups get connected privately, different levels of communication will be in the formation. This increases the possibility for the formation of strong ties.

Being aware of the possibility of eroding face-to-face social interaction in this digital era, moderators and ordinary *Tianyaers* are now trying to get participants together in real life. In some situations, offline meetings or gatherings take place when CMC seems inadequate and people involved are really keen to discuss further about some issues or build friendship. Over time, interest groups are formed, shaped and stabilized even from dispersive discussions. During the process, one important factor — reciprocity — should not be ignored. Individuals may choose to take part in one activity or another voluntarily, strictly speaking, but may still harbor the hope of being repaid in all kinds of ways. This return of favor might not realize immediately, or may never be returned. But meanwhile, it makes people feel secure encountering difficulties in the indeterminate future.

Participatory design, as a way to involve people in creating and sharing resources voluntarily with fellow citizens, was difficult to carry out if people had no close

hierarchical ties with high-ranking officials. In current China, although formal channels of citizen participation are still lacking, informal power seems to be a good substitute, and in fact it could exert great power. Rooted in Confucianism, legitimacy of leadership in this country rests upon the moral superiority of the leaders and consensus of the masses, rather than institutions. As a result, informal relations become more effective in dealing with various issues. That is why informal virtual behaviors can affect government agendas and social transformations. But to succeed or just survive in contemporary China, *Tianya* still needs state recognition and permission as well as mass support. As a burgeoning new business model, the media company has to pay close attention to Chinese political realities and firmly obey them, or at least strategically deal with them. Different communities interact with authoritarian tactics differently, which makes their respective development different in various ways.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Resource Distribution and Relationship Building in *Tianya***

The mechanisms of constructing social capital in *Tianya* are based on interplays among authoritarian institutions, traditional culture, and CMC. In Chapter 2, I did an exploratory study of CMC, addressing the detailed process of mobilizing collective action in theory. It highlighted the following: (1) CMC in *Tianya* contributes to the redistribution of resources to the degree of “selectivity”; (2) the redistribution of resources such as homophilous and heterophilous networks and forms a “digital hierarchy” based on social knowledge, mainly by creating activist groups; (3) the loosely coupled heterogeneity of social networks which mobilize collective actions through different approaches. This chapter discusses the first two aspects, claiming that “what we have and do in daily life” determines, to some extent, whom we know, and what relationships we have with others. As it illustrates, constructing social capital through CMC mark a transition from a society that is unacquainted with CMC to one that can cooperate through it.

#### **4.1 Resource Distribution**

On February 1, 2010, Xintai government in Shandong Province published a notice, “Proposed Candidates of Leading Cadres in *Xintai* through Open Selection” on its

government website.<sup>83</sup> Someone criticized the legitimacy and equality of the selection publicly in a post on February 22, 2010, after which questioning and distrust permeated Chinese cyberspace from all quarters. By February 25, there were 72 related posts in *Tianya Zatan*, all voicing doubts.<sup>84</sup> Negative posts (or neutral at best) analyzing the promotion principles behind this phenomenon filled the sub-community, full of detailed background information about these candidates, such as their hometowns, official positions of their parents and relatives, social status of their significant others, and even their personal photos. All these information was available to millions of Chinese at home or abroad.<sup>85</sup>

Some questions arise then: How could these *Tianyans* be sure that there was a black-box operation behind this promotion since they had never been to *Xintai* or met these candidates? What did they know about them just several days after this announcement? Viewing information as one special type of material resources, the technological power of this new media is now changing both the quantity and quality of resources being delivered to individuals.<sup>86</sup> This is determined by China's political reality. In China, mass media has never been an independent agency, but rather, a tool highly monopolized by the government to create national unity and political identity.

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<sup>83</sup> Online at <http://www.xintai.gov.cn/contents/43/6249.html>. Accessed on October 26, 2010.

<sup>84</sup> I searched the words “*Xintai*” in that sub-community on February 25, 2010 at 17:37 hours.

<sup>85</sup> One post titled “looking at China's Tragedy from ‘*Xintai*’s Promotion of Deputy Director Born in 1980s’ ” attracted 6704 visits and 104 comments sharing diverse personal opinions till 23:41, 36 hours after it was posted. Online at <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/1816452.shtml>. Accessed on March 23, 2010.

<sup>86</sup> The most salient feature that distinguishes social resources from individual or human resources is that their values can only be realized through collective use. Take information as an example, without others' making, one cannot get certain piece of information; without receivers' using, evaluating and reproducing, information does not have any value.

Virtual communities are set up to satisfy mass communication<sup>87</sup>, taking mundane conversations as its common exemplar. In *Tianya Zatan*, where there are no settled communication agendas and schedules, it is difficult to control the origins and outcomes of using resources, had the government not shut down Internet access completely.<sup>88</sup> In this case, the spontaneity and flexibility of CMC militates against dominant social structures based on centralized state power, making the free flow of resources more likely.

Before the information era, a majority of personal social circles were confined within a limited scope of relatives, friends, existing predominantly in schools and workplaces. They communicate with a limited number of persons about a limited number of social issues; and their perceptions on social issues are probably misled because of resource shortage. However, the collective use in a virtual community does not require the physical presence of the sender and receiver, the disclosure of their identities, or the impingement of their privacy, especially in *Tianya*, which is relatively high in its level of decentrality. Moreover, one's employment of resources in *Tianya* will not decrease the availability for others, facilitated by faster computing.

Nevertheless, the decentralization is still selective in three aspects. First of all,

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<sup>87</sup> For instance, *Tianya*, one of the most popular unofficial virtual communities came into being because virtual mass communication was booming. Another instance, one of the most famous official communities – Strengthening the Nation Forum (*Qiangguo Luntan*) – was originally set up by *People's Daily* as “BBS for strong protest against the atrocity of NATO” in May 9, 1999, to channel the public indignation at the U.S.-led NATO's barbaric attack on the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia into online discussion.

<sup>88</sup> All these interviewees, both online and offline, agreed that it was not wise or practical for the government to shut down the entire Internet access.



although *Tianya* has earned much more independence from the government compared with traditional mass media and, hence, has made civic engagement more effective, it still cannot survive without the state's permission. As Zheng noted:

First, the government exercises only selective control over information flow; that is, it blocks only information with political sensitivity that can undermine regime legitimacy and is perceived as violating national security. Second, the government also uses selective penal measures to constrain those who have attempted to transgress the boundaries that the government has established for Internet users.<sup>89</sup>

Secondly, the user ID requirement somehow prevents individuals from taking disruptive actions to challenge political authority, since it is closely associated with the member's identity in *Tianya*. Thirdly, resource distribution in *Tianya* is, and will, never be totally equal. Almost all the virtual communities in China share similar rules telling people what they can and cannot say online, one of which is, "No speeches threatening national security, leaking state secrets, subverting state power and undermining state unity". Moderators constantly supervise all conversations, according to these rules. Since these rules are mostly based on the macro-level and are often ambiguous, most participants cannot be totally sure what kinds of messages will get through community and state surveillance.

Even worse, to answer, "why were so many Chinese netizens unsatisfied with this promotion", I find that no matter who they are — government officials, media workers, cleaner, vagrants or ex-convicts — most *Tianyaers* share a common pursuit for political power. People say that some participants criticize government

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<sup>89</sup> Zheng, 2007, 95.

ill-performance, social inequalities and other social problems only because they have not benefitted from vested interests. Once they have accessed hierarchical power or resources, their online behaviors may stop. Therefore, CMC is still a way to gain hierarchical positions. At its foundation, everybody ends up doing the same thing, although not in the same way. Then, the problem becomes that the differences in resource usage causes resource redistribution. Through investigation, there are mainly two types of resource redistribution in *Tianya* and many other communities: the creation of new resources and employment of existing ones.

#### **4.1.1 Creation of New Resources**

Voluntary involvement, especially the creation of new resources, in diverse conversations serves as the foundation for *Tianya*'s success. Without contributions by the pioneering "netsurfers", *Tianya* would not exist. As discussed in Chapter 3, the outstanding feature of *Tianya*, compared with websites focusing on instant news, is its high mutuality. Community members provide *Tianya*'s content for free, under moderators' guidance and encouragement. For instance, a high school student who gets a competitive score in the university entrance examination shares ideas about best time management practices for the exam, how to be more relaxed within a limited time period, and tries to send or sell his notes; or an experienced nurse writes a list of food and drinks a patient with erosive gastritis should avoid; or a lawyer advertises his contact number and address to provide the poor with legal advices and even offers his *pro bono*; or a professor shares knowledge about the Chinese political

system and its legitimacy. In doing so, some may be aware of their agenda-setting influences on the community; others may not.

A fundamental question arises: With partial anonymity and little charge, in addition to the distance from centralized control, why do so many people contribute so much to the community? The reasons vary. From interviews, I found that almost all active contributors bear explicit ambitions in their minds, including:

- To uncover social, economic, political rumors and change judicial injustice.

- To share life experiences and increase their personal knowledge.

- To fight against ignorance and cultivate awareness (for instance, ideas about religion, morality, spiritual pursuits).

- To transform interpersonal communication model (for instance, develop *Tianya* into a website able to compete with Facebook).

- To inform others about social reality (for instance, the real life of migrant workers in cities, the danger in using traditional Chinese medicine, the lives of civil servants).

- To improve academics (for instance, keep its political neutrality).

- To gain personal benefit like recognition, fame and reputation.

A large proportion of the online population shares an ambition of challenging existing authority, shifting it from a central group of leaders to multiple groups of participants, in economic, political, social and cultural areas, as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Distribution of posts in three areas in *Tianya Zatan*<sup>90</sup>

Areas	No. of posts displaying strong ambitions	No. of posts lacking strong ambitions	No. of posts eulogizing
Economic	51	34	4
Social	176	248	21
Political	139	17	9
Total no. of posts	366	299	34

The determination of a post’s category is made according to whether it has directly mentioned the shortcomings of existing political, social, economic or cultural system or not. For instance, a post claiming “our culture is becoming a wasteland”, is categorized into the first column. An alternative explanation of *Tianyaers’* cynicism, based on their discussion, was the illegitimacy of existing authority from inheritance rather through free and fair elections (or at least public approval). Under this circumstance, their conversations are consciously or subconsciously challenging it. But not all acts of resource creation are allowed or will turn out to be effective in a popular non-focal virtual community such as *Tianya*, since more influential communities are always more highly supervised. Moderators should investigate content and expressions; success requires contributors’ digital skills — both for effectiveness and security — which are then reinforced in return (Figure 4.1).

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<sup>90</sup> These posts are collected from August 19 to November 18, a total of 92 days. For eight days during this period, either the Internet or the *Tianya* Community was not accessible. Based on my methodology, collecting 10 posts everyday at the distance of 10 posts, 840 posts were collected. But when filling this table, I found that there were 9 posts removed from the sub-community the entire *Tianya*, and 132 posts were repeated. For the final count, therefore, 699 posts were studied as valid.

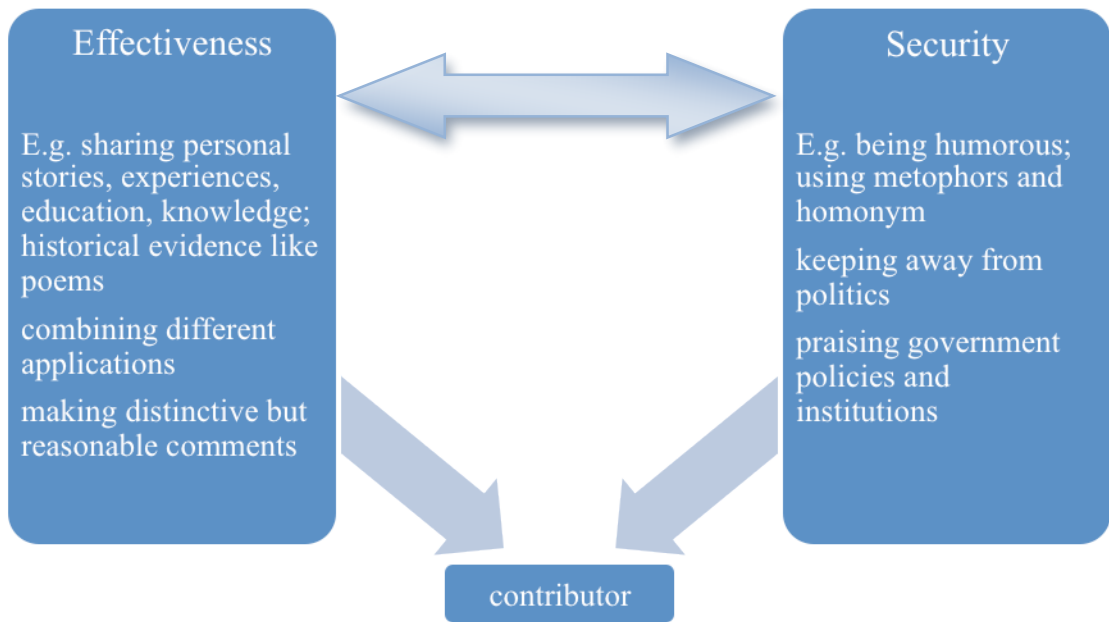


Figure 4.1 Digital Skills for Effectiveness and Security

There are several examples making good combination of effectiveness and security, as well as examples that sacrifice one for the other. Sometimes, to cater to the majority's preferences and gain recognition from one's social circle, one needs to behave accordingly. There are a number of "angry youths" (*Fen Qing* in Chinese) who exhibit a deep sense of hatred for the wealthy and the government officials; this group of netizens seems not to care about personal security. Some of them believe that they have nothing more to lose, they use fairly strong words, in the name of public equality, to criticize the people they hate. Sometimes, in order to survive among these angry youths, ordinary netizens have to write anti-authority posts. Meanwhile, to survive in an authoritarian country, one has to deal with political issues cautiously and make neutral and moderate comments. For rational individuals,

extreme thoughts separated from social reality can do nothing good to themselves in resolving real problems and acquiring social reputation. For the community itself, merely one-sided complaints keep alternative perspectives out of the door, detaching the community from the real world, and ultimately causing the latter's demise.

There is a trade-off between social expectation and state permission, which changes over time. In contemporary China, only inclusive and tolerant communities such as *Tianya* can survive and burgeon in the long run; only netizens who can smoothly trade off between the two are likely to gather more or better resources under state manipulation; or, as *Tianyans* say:

Although my posts have always been obliterated, I still think I'm enjoying great freedom here, simply because freedom is highly related to wisdom rather than state prohibition. To survive here and also the Chinese society as a whole, I have to adjust my words accordingly all the time. It is not something unfair or unreasonable but a common challenge. I controlled or adjusted my posts to improve my ability in managing language. This skill is vital to my cyber-power in connecting with others. (Interviewee 1)

As a leader of this sub-community, I have always been objective, therefore I have not been opposed massively but stay at the center of my network. (Interviewee 2)

Previously, a *Tianyer* was arrested because of his novel about Dongguan (a city in Guangdong). It makes others realize that virtual behaviors are rigidly restricted by the reality. Thereupon, netizens here might pay attention to personal security in order to survive in the community and real life. (Interviewee 11)

The most straightforward lesson from the statistical report by the Chinese Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) was that many active netizens in China are

those with low-income, low educational level, and low social status.<sup>91</sup> Although not supported by statistical data, it is seen from interviews with *Tianya* moderators and observations that *Tianya* (as the typical synthetic community) also shares this demographic. This feature could be read as a weakness or strength. On the one hand, CMC does not penetrate into different classes in China on an equal basis: most active participants are those from the lower rungs of the hierarchy, while power is still in the hands of the higher hierarchy. On the other hand, people from the lower ends of the hierarchy are participating in civic activities with greater enthusiasm that was unimaginable in the past. In fact, it can be said that the “underdogs” are obtaining social resources from the “bullies”.

Another way in which resource creation enjoys both security and effectiveness without the cautious trading-off involves discussing apolitical issues while subtly redistributing social resources and challenging power authority. An example is ordinary netizen Zhang Xiaoyan who became famous because of her uncommon experience of traveling to Tibet alone with 83 Chinese *yuan*. Subsequently, several publishers contacted her to publish her story. Both material resources (money) and symbolic resources (fame) thus reached her and other participants:

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<sup>91</sup> According to Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (January 2010), demographic characteristics of Chinese Internet users are as below: the gender ration of male to female Internet users is 54.2: 45.8; the proportions of users aged from 10-19, 20-29, 30-39, and 40-49 are respectively 31.8%, 28.6%, 21.5% and 10.7%, and when compared to 2008, that of users aged above 30 has increased significantly; the educational level of primary school and lower, junior middle school, high school, college and university are 8.8%, 26.8%, 40.2%, 12.2% and 12.1%; the proportion of top six professions – unemployed/laid-off, self employed/freelancers, professionals, non managerial white collar, government organization worker and student – are separately 9.8%, 13.0%, 10.4%, 15.0%, 7.5% and 28.8%; the proportion of different income level from RMB 3001-5000, 2001-3000, 1501-2000, 1001-1500, below 500 and no income are 9.3%, 15.4%, 13.4%, 13.7%, 14.5%, 18.0% and 10.0%.

Other netizens treat me like a spiritual leader to trust in and rely on. And my experiences and words seem to teach some people to be optimistic, brave and unswerving; to build trust and love in others. In short, more opportunities are offered for all of us to obtain things we really need. (Interviewee 12)

#### **4.1.2 Employment of Existing Resources**

When there is creation, there must be employment. Many *Tianyaers* would think that, if active contribution were so tiring and troublesome, why not just listen and read? That is what another group of people do. Their employment of resources without being charged is the result of decentralization, seen as participants' selection and absorption of resources for themselves. It is the very basic premise for the majority of *Tianyaers*. On the one hand, new resources are assigned values only through the process of employment — “no use, no value”. On the other hand, without resource employment, resources are hard to circulate, both in virtual environment and real life:

For ordinary netizens, interaction is a mutual behavior. For instance, in *Tianya*, the poster always creates resources, and other netizens provide new resources while receiving these resources through comments and tags. It is this interacting process that builds a virtual community, doesn't it? (Interviewee 11)

Presenting resource employment in a continuum according to the degree of participation, this section discusses the two extremes — active sharing and passive receiving (Fig 4.2). People at different points along this continuum have different ability to interact with others and form shared feelings. At the left extreme, resources are redistributed effectively and a variety of netizens are interacting with others; at the right extreme, a general sense of community is formed but there is no apparent



interpersonal interaction. The significance of this continuum is the free choice in the level of resource employment along this continuum.



Figure 4.2 A continuum of resource employment

In *Tianya*, resources tend to flow to those in need or those who are most qualified, across geographic boundaries. Traditionally, one person can only be a member of one community at one time, behaving according to the rules constituted by his community, and asking for help mostly from his neighbors.<sup>92</sup> The only way to be a member of another community and participate in its activities is to move to that community or change his/her residential status. However, this is unrealistic for many people, especially the young generation busy at work.<sup>93</sup> As a result, this geographic restriction tends to restrict nationwide resource sharing.

However, virtual employment overcomes this shortcoming.<sup>94</sup> Rather than merely receiving or giving “static” resources, netizens help to distribute them dynamically.

For example, a Hakka girl told her story in two sub-communities in *Tianya*, about

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<sup>92</sup> Traditional communities depend heavily on geographic boundaries such as neighborhoods and villages where people live together. But things started to change when interest-based social groups emerged. Without the Internet, their influences were still limited.

<sup>93</sup> But the number of immigrants in China, or even worldwide, is steadily increasing because of education, job arrangement, marriage and many other factors.

<sup>94</sup> For example, to register as a member of China’s well-known online community – *Tianya*, people only need to click on the “Free Registration” button, type in a new username, enter their chosen password twice, commonly used email address, and identifying code, and finally click on the “submission” button. This takes from several minutes to several hours to get approval from the administrator. After that, anyone can read posts in this forum, share their feelings of anger, hatred, love and happiness on numerous topics such as official corruption, marriage, national education system, etc.

how she was abandoned by her mother and had to live in poverty with her grandmother, how she decided to call her father “uncle” when he wanted to marry another woman, and how she studied and worked hard to live a better life, for herself and her grandmother. Her optimism, aggressive attitude and firm determination in realizing her dreams moved many readers and stimulated their desire to help her, by sending her money or supporting her spiritually. Although acephalous, participants’ involvement are doubtlessly helping in distributing both material and symbolic resources to this Hakka girl, who is badly in need of them.

Another example is the post titled, “Two Primary Schools in the Countryside and one Volunteer Teacher”. It is a story about a volunteer teacher’s inspiring deeds — for many years, since he was a student, Xu Benyu has given his money, mostly in the form of scholarships and subsidies, to help poor children; when he graduated from university, he became a volunteer teacher in his hometown, a remote and backward village. The poster was certainly the creator of symbolic resources such as the image of volunteer teachers, public recognition, which are available to all Chinese netizens through CMC. After his creation, many other participants involved as spreaders. In December 2004, the result of CCTV *Moving China Award’s* “Person of the Year” was announced, and Xu was one of 10 winners. This award, regarded as a typical affirmation of nationwide reputation, is no longer given exclusively to people who already have sufficient resources in real life.

Being a person who moved netizens in *Tianya*, and eventually people all over China, Xu has earned his reputation from netizens' voting, commenting, and discussing. Even though he may not need it desperately, he can be counted as one of these most qualified for it. Furthermore, his reputation may lead to material resources, such as money, to support him or his students, or many other poor children all around China. Compared to radical creation, the act of mild employment is harder to be measured but sometimes more effective. It is true that when something terrible happens, non-activists are not the ones to be blamed and punished. Likewise, when something meaningful happens, they are not the ones to be praised.

The two orientations of resource flow — to the most needed and qualified — are the manifestation of power decentralization and resource redistribution made possible by CMC. It is more difficult for traditional authorities to exert control over the flow of resources as before. Besides, passive receiving may show no strong yearning for self-expression, but a sense of community. When asked about why they choose to read posts in *Tianya*, answers mainly include:

The content in *Tianya* is pretty diverse, and the netizens here are quite smart and talented. There are always interesting things happening.

*Tianya* is the most humane virtual community I have ever seen. Why should I waste my time looking for another one?

I came to *Tianya* because many of my friends in real life told me it is an interesting community. Even though I seldom engage in discussion here, I don't want to leave after so many years' observing. I have been used to it.

I like the atmosphere here – relaxed, random, and creative.

For some moderators, helping to redistribute resources among the others is one reason for their continued presence in *Tianya*. For other ordinary *Tianyaers*, the feeling of belonging to this humane community was the only reason. Although having no remarkable effects on resource redistribution in *Tianya*, their online participation may spill over into real life, such as sharing with real-life friends information about job opportunities people find online. It is especially important for those with few resources in the traditional social system. Those with enough resources in real life do not need *Tianya* to make their dreams come true but may simply use it to supplement their lives. In this sense, resource usage online also tends to confine the actors within the group of the like-minded.

## **4.2 Network Building**

In practice, absolute freedom for everyone is impossible, even in grassroots virtual communities like *Tianya*. However, once one learns his way around a highly developed virtual community system, he can exchange resources with others, engendering in other participants an interest in cooperation. With that:

Shared identities, at community or societal level, tend to be built, entailing an ongoing connection between individuals or groups of individuals, albeit one that is sometimes tenuous, sensitive and hard to sustain. There are multitudinous congenial companions in such a large world, and multitudinous netizens will support these right things against social inequality. My students, teachers and colleagues in police forces have seen my style, and their ratification becomes my symbolic resource — support. Besides, the help from the media makes my cases hotpoints, which dispels snobbish personnel chasing after vicious power and weakens the force trying to hit me because of public pressure. Thereafter, my situation is improved. (Interviewee 15)

The reason for this is that, in this digital era, Chinese society is becoming more individualized, causing social indifference, irresponsibility and isolation. To be safe and to get support, dispersed individuals enter *Tianya* to discuss with unfamiliar “others”, which makes *Tianya* a “global electronic agora where the diversity of human disaffection explodes in a cacophony of accents”<sup>95</sup>. In this case, the very factor that fosters individualism also helps to glue these isolated individuals together.

It is generally granted that individual value systems, characteristics, preferences, skills and knowledge will shape the network formation. When asked to compare their online relations with their offline ones, some say that:

There is not much difference between the two. Many friends in *Tianya* became my good friends in real life. It is the difference between *Tianya* and many other websites: interaction in *Tianya* is based on common interests and ambitions. We have already known each other very well in *Tianya*, and when it penetrates into real life, interaction among us won't change much. (Interviewee 2)

There is no significant difference between the two, and whether I can make friends with someone depends on their personal characteristics, morality and interests. (Interviewee 4)

Of course there is no difference, why should there be? Our relationships are based on the same interest in certain social issues rather than something shameful. (Interviewee 13)

But there are also others who disagree:

Social relations online are absolutely weaker than that in real life. They have different standards: in *Tianya*, so-called friends are just these with similar interests; while in real life, friends are really friends based on individual characteristics and experiences. For instance, friends in real life don't need to talk about politics, but merely hang out for lunch or poker games together. (Interviewee 14)

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<sup>95</sup> Castells, 2001, 138.

This section then describes the network rebuilding as a purpose-personality-network model, framed as two fundamental assumptions: (1) active participants, aiming at obtaining new resources as the purpose of CMC, tends to build heterophilous networks; (2) participants who mainly engage in maintaining existing resources (through sharing) tend to build homophilous networks.

#### **4.2.1 Heterophilous Relations**

One moderator indicated that there is a virtual group based on the platform of *Tianya* consisting of hundreds of people, each with a distinctive social status, knowledge and background, sharing his/her personal experiences and views. Through reading their daily conversations and answers to questions such as, “Initially, what mobilized your participation in *Tianya*?” and “What did you do when you found that *Tianya* was not the community you thought before and your requirement had not been realized here?”, it became apparent that a considerable number say that online participation was just a personal interest. Although existing as an independent group with social boundaries, it builds on a shared identity that is considerably inclusive and tolerant of others. Just as some members observed:

Even if no one to share and get support, I’m not alone. Because I believe that I’m still myself and there must be someone who can understand me in the world. (Member 1)

Hoping that CMC can help to organize parochial interest groups regardless of social values is itself naïve. Without mature value system and broad mind, group members will break up with each other inevitably, and the group will disappear. (Member 2)

No one is absolutely right or wrong. The pleasure of CMC is the simplicity in sharing, debating, learning and helping. (Member 3)

Individuals in this group were well prepared to accept “others” inside or outside of it, which provides an opportunity for the formation of heterophilous relations with people unlike each other. One important precondition of heterophilous relations is the diversity of participants, which reaches out to the marginalized minority on one side, and the high-status elites on the other. More significant is the participants’ inclusive attitudes. They believe that passive creation of new resources, even in a small amount, is a reliable method to exchange for better resources. The two factors, then, strengthen the supremacy of creativity in resource usage.

Participants note that if others agree with someone in the course of a conversation, he will have a sense of accomplishment; if they challenge him, he will be more motivated to prove his own viewpoints. Each tries to make sense through CMC, regardless of how sensible (or not) their comments are. But their similar active involvement has different results among people with different intentions: narrow-minded participants for me-centered purposes will become more intolerant; the broad-minded participants for public-centered objectives will be more open.

If it is proved that opposite ideas are correct, there is no reason for me to stick to my own ideas. Why not just accept theirs? (Interviewee 1)

The majority of *Tianyaers* participate to show that they are smart. As I know, most of them, except these peasant-workers, don’t like the style of my novel. They prefer to see how peasant-workers are abused, then they can express their sympathy. (Interviewee 3)

You can see from my post that numerous comments make it just a mess. I welcome all these trying to make fun and communicate normally. The point is many people denigrate traditional culture endlessly. They are now still communicating in my posts. Therefore, I’m tired of CMC and decide to give this up. (Interviewee 6)

The types of participating purposes — me-centered self-expression and public-centered social sharing — in some degree determine the feature and strength of their respective relations (Figure 4.3). For me-centered purposes, the “charismatic leader” organizes his or her statements using expressions with strong preference, at the expense of depreciating or repudiating competing voices. Although contrasting opinions always exist and are voiced, these radicals’ initial standpoints are hard to change, and more likely to be intensified. As a result, people with the same ambition in maintaining existing social resources will gather for a common purpose, and form strong social relations. A radical *Tianyaer* told his story:

I discussed about what Christianity really is and warned these Christians and believers not to worship it blindly, in *Tianya Zatan*, which infuriated most of them. They criticized me severely. Their great anger ultimately grouped them as a collectivity to resist my thoughts, such as refused to read my posts and bribed the moderators to block all my posts about Christianity. In real-life meeting, they even treated me as the man of Satan. (Interviewee 1)

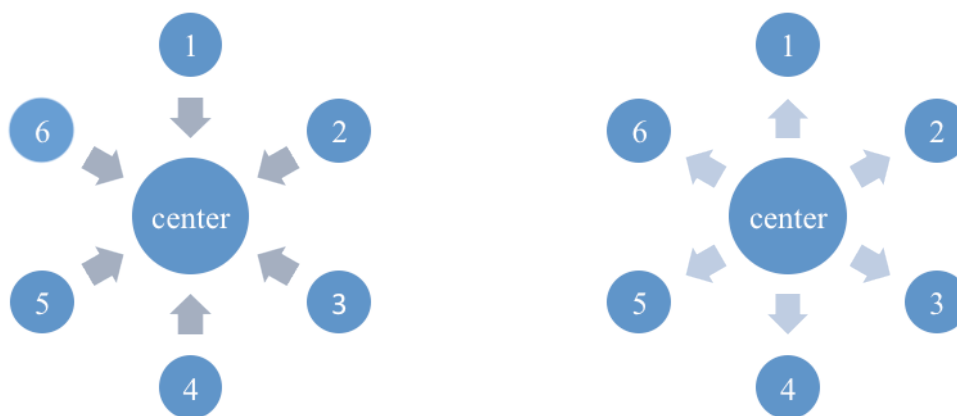


Figure 4.3 Me-centered network (left) and Public-centered network (right)



When asked why they treated him in such a way, he said he believed that their belief in Christianity was so ingrained that others can hardly undermine it. This kind of social relations can be read as strong heterophilous relations formed by people with distinctive resources. But these networks are exclusive to outsiders, which will exacerbate societal cleavages and threaten the survival of civil society.

For public-centered participants, one's personal interest is not their focus, at least not their major concern, just as the virtual group based on *Tianya* mentioned at the beginning of this section. Networks formed here are much more inclusive, and it is from the inner core that bonds ramify outwards, but weaker than me-centered ones.

#### **4.2.2 Homophilous Relations**

People tend to interact with individuals similar to them in resources, positions or power. Especially for non-activists, creating distinctive thoughts and gaining wide support from diverse social sections was not their primary concerns, either because they were satisfied with the current situation or were not enthusiastic about changing it. And little change will occur to their standpoints without strong challenges. Although they may read and think about innovative ideas, they consider paying much attention to them a time consuming and troublesome exercise. As they said:

I have already built my own value system, and it is too strong to be affected by my online participation. (Interviewee 2)

I focus on expressing my ideas online, rather than interacting with others. (Interviewee 3)

Surely, most netizens participate in conversations they are interested in. (Interviewee 11)

Engaging in *Tianya* is just part of my life. I don't have so much time to argue with most of the voices there. (Interviewee 12)

For them, *Tianya* is more a sphere for enjoying life and relaxing or, in other words, self-expression. Even more, obtaining better resources has little attraction, since they are either unable to do it, or they believe that CMC is not so important and powerful:

We peasants do not rely on Internet resources to solve our problems. First of all, I don't think the Internet is so capable. Second, I have too many things to care about for earning a better life. If there are other alternatives, I don't want to use forces. Third, we ordinary peasants know little about the law, so when something happens, we always deal with it through *minjian* (unofficial) approaches. (Interviewee 8)

In general, forming homophilous networks here is investigated in two approaches: (1) distinguishing oneself from certain groups of identity, values and culture; or (2) attributing oneself into certain groups. The first approach is always carried out in negotiating or competing with a common "enemy", such as the government or an abhorred/detested public figure. This kind of public-centered homophilous networks gives individuals strong power in changing the courses of high-profile social agendas and realizing social goals. The second approach is more likely to take place under the condition that participants are eager to find a circle within which to "reside" and obtain a sense of belonging. The me-centered networks in this case are more random but might be intensified eventually. Even more, both approaches offer opportunities for sharing of resources, which might help to form heterophilous relations.

The first example is the wide use of “fifty-cent party” (*wu mao dang*)<sup>96</sup>. Originated in a university BBS forum, “fifty-cent party” is now used to define someone who says something positive or neutral about the government, an entity that is actually disdained and hated by the public. Anyone using this expression is identifying those holding pro-government views as a group, while at the same time positioning him/herself within another. Although that may appear irrational, it somehow shows people’s efforts in searching for an identity, one that is independent of official opinions and traditional expert support. Along with it, group members feel a sense of connection within respective groups that tends to form homophilous connections.

Insufficient resources for the disadvantaged in the past have aggravated their reliance on the government and tolerance of its misbehavior, which are counterproductive to the awareness of autonomy. The initiation of political practice such as community deliberation is, to some degree, a result of elites’ political commitment, which rarely considers public requirements. This, in return, reinforces the hierarchy between social sections.

But CMC is making a difference. As Dun’an (the director of the Internet Propaganda Management Office in Anhui Province) pointed out: “On the Internet, an ordinary person can make ‘one call to draw millions of responses’ ”<sup>97</sup>. Actually not all these

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<sup>96</sup> “Fifty-cent party” represents commentators employed by the government to engage in online discussion like ordinary netizens but praising the government, and will be paid by the number of messages posted — fifty cents for each message.

<sup>97</sup> “News on Internet-based social movement have reached millions of clicks, making government cadres feel worried”, accessed August 25, 2010, <http://news.qq.com/a/20090601/000561.htm>

responses are from regular netizens, but some are just from “waverers”. The possibility of these waverers’ active involvement comes from their desires to be networked. For instance, as one said, “staying with people in the same camp makes me feel like I’m not working alone.” But whether one event can provoke some waverers to show up (or not) depends on the nature of the event and its relevance to netizens and their abilities, experiences and personal perceptions. These deeply embedded social connections might not immediately constitute a shared identity, (one that provokes and sustains collective actions), but it does indicate an initial gathering. The model of the combination of different relations, then, is summarized in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 A purpose-personality-network model of relations through CMC

Purposes of Investment Means of Investment	Me-centered	Public-centered
	Creation	Heterophilous and strong relations
Employment	Homophilous and weak relations	Homophilous and strong relations

### 4.2.3 Dispersive Networks, Stable Relations

The difference between homophilous and heterophilous networks could lie in their choice of methods to achieve something or the degree of their planned depth of transformation, rather than something basic in nature, as presented in Table 4.3. The relationship between them is interpreted as a cooperation-competition pattern.

Table 4.3 Comparison of four types of networks

Category	Strengths	Weakness
Strong hetero-networks	Easy to redistribute resources, and lubricate cooperation	Might be inappropriately used by some individuals
Weak hetero-networks	Easy to join and leave	Weak identity sharing, no clear agenda or objectives
Strong homo-networks	Almost completely exclusive	Hard to enter and leave
Weak homo-networks	Adaptive and resistant to attack	Cost more to be mobilized

Indeed, both homophilous and heterophilous relations have their own merits, and social actors do not need to abandon one type for another. In addition, the above method of differentiation is somehow farfetched. In fact, creation and employment are concurrent most of the time, thereafter, homo- and heterophilous networks are interweaved with each other. People are not necessarily required to withdraw from one type of usage in order to adopt another, and in fact, no one will be completely involved in a single type of relations. Besides, unrestricted identity switches/changes, transcending relational limits, lubricate the networking process.

Although there is a discrepancy between people in different digital-hierarchies, CMC is accelerating resource exchanges among them. The major reason is that CMC, being based on personal knowledge, experiences and ways of expression, restrains the disturbance of ostensible determinants such as age, appearance and gender. Although weak networks are vulnerable to external challenges, the interrelated essence of crosscutting identities is often successful at bridging unacquainted persons together and enabling their cooperation in the long run. Although strong networks are

exclusive to the outsiders, it is easier to get people into them for a common purpose. Thus the generalization here is: strong networks are good for the stability of specific groups, while weak networks are good for the stability of communities at large without central leadership and institutional protection. From these analyses, it is clear that the absence of collective identity, group leadership, and a social environment reflect or even determine the mechanisms of mobilizing collective actions.

## Chapter 5

### Collective Mobilization:

#### Duo Maomao-Case

### 5.1 Collective Mobilization

Numerous social issues are posted in *Tianya Zatan* everyday, but only a small percentage provoke public concern, and even fewer result in offline mass movement.

Yang (2009) attributed this to the “lack of public resonance”:

A college student who posts messages to protest the lack of air conditioning in her classroom may gain some classmates’ support, but the issues has little chance of going beyond the campus. Generally speaking, issues that are more relevant to the everyday experiences of the larger population, that appeal to the moral sense of right or wrong, and that have a more concrete attribution of blame have higher degrees of resonance.<sup>98</sup>

Seen in this context, whether a social issue is likely to mobilize collective action would depend on the type of event *per se*. Then the questions become: what kinds of events are likely to attract public attention and drive collective action? Why this particular event, rather than that? Table 5.1 summarizes the content analyses of the top eight high-profile social events listed in *People.com*. From this, it can be concluded that these events go beyond simple complaining or bristling when they: (1) feature real-life problems that challenge the value system shared by a large population;

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<sup>98</sup> Yang Guobin. *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, 2009, 57. Public resonance here is not just the consent among a group of people, but the shared perception at community or societal level, which can provoke nation-wide emotions.

(2) are rooted within the local context, or a minimum level of concreteness, in terms of both the “place” and practical pertinence.

Table 5.1 Representativeness and concreteness of top-eight events in 2009<sup>99</sup>

Events	Representativeness	Concreteness
Wang Shuai	Land acquisition	Directed at Lingbao government.
Deng Yujiao	The disadvantaged against the officials	A government official died, and a young, low-status woman was arrested.
Panyu Dump	Environment protection	Burning trash in a settled residential area.
Duo Maomao	Abnormal death in prison	A young man died in a prison while playing game.
Entrapment in Shanghai	Economic interest and law implementation	A man was arrested, and he cut his fingers to prove his innocence.
The most arrogant wife of a colonel	Misuse of public power	The wife of a high-status colonel vilified a commentator in a place of interest.
Xu Baobao	Doctors’ dereliction of duty	A baby died because of the doctor’s dereliction of duty in Nanjin.
Kunming Luoshiwan	Demolition and resettlement	Hundreds of residents in that area gathered to oppose the demolition.

As can be seen in Table 5.1, all of the events contradict the social norms and values shared by a large segment of the population. Although more participants do not necessarily guarantee success, many Chinese believe that “strength lies in numbers” and they have a shared history of mass movements that overthrew the government and changed political regimes. The nature of Chinese political regime at this stage is still authoritarian, reflected in the endogenous selection of state leaders and high-ranking government officials, the regulation of mass media, and the limited

<sup>99</sup> Available online at <http://yq.people.com.cn/zt/zy5/>. Accessed January 8, 2011. That year, People.com became the first official news website to initiate a “Public Opinion Channel”, and is generally recognized as the state’s attention to online public opinion. The following year, it began to rank these in terms of popularity, severity and representativeness.



freedom of speech. Over time, distrust in the government has become ingrained in people's minds. When events take place, netizens deliver radical speeches in *Tianya* to gather public anger or sympathy. When the collective intelligence reaches its apex, real-life mass movements are likely to break out.

Many of these Internet-based movements appear "rooted in local context" but in fact seem to seek national or even global impact, making these social networks more open. Issues in all social areas could turn into collective action, but the focus here is on events that shape local contexts, with real subjects and toward specific government or social policies. To mobilize collective action for events with the above features, general mechanisms must emerge out of the complexity. This section suggests trajectories of action by identifying three crucial determinants: collective identity, group leadership, and the social environment.

### **5.1.1 Collective Identity**

In contemporary China, and as many studies have shown<sup>100</sup>, collective actions are rooted in crises of community and identity in real life. The moderator of "Academic China" in *Tianya* observed:

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<sup>100</sup> "Every cooperative group of people exists in the face of a competitive world because that group of people recognizes there is something valuable that they can gain only by banding together, looking for a group's collective goods is a way of looking for the elements that bind isolated individuals into a community." Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company 1993, 13. "It is induced by the crisis of patriarchalism, and the subsequent disintegration of the traditional nuclear family, as constituted in the late nineteenth century. It is sustained (*but not produced*) by the new patterns of urbanization, as suburban and exurban sprawl, and the de-linking between function and meaning in the micro-places of megacities, individualize and fragment the spatial context of livelihood." Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press 2001, 129. "Furthermore, the crisis of identity and community and the expansion and deepening of social grievances compel citizens to expand their channels of expression and to innovate contentious forms." Yang Guobin, 2009, 101.

During this transitional period (economic marketization, political democratization and cultural diversification), Chinese citizens are suffering from high unemployment, social instability and government unreliability. As a result, traditional value system and cultural ascription have been destroyed or at least undermined. Chinese people have no religion or belief but merely pursuit for material interests. (Interviewee 5)

In the long run, it is likely that an increase in social instability will result in more Chinese netizens' taking radical actions in multiple social areas, when no other approach is available. Collective mobilization will increasingly emphasize common values or perceived membership in a like-minded community. This section provides a comprehensive explanation on how collective identity can be formed within a large population.

In general, this pattern locates the origin of collective action in the cognitive process of identity formation, through which civilization contradicts and ultimately reverses the traditional structure.<sup>101</sup> It highlights that shared values are indispensable in bringing together unfamiliar people in making claims and acting on those claims. The value of democracy and freedom make people more aware of the perceived social illness in China, and changes individual and collective psychology; grievance at hand always manipulates the efficacy of organizing networked individuals, trying to make a difference in accomplishing tasks.

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<sup>101</sup> It is in line with Yang's identification of three issues prominent in Internet contention. "First is neonationalism... Second is the rights of vulnerable individuals and disempowered social groups... Third is social injustices committed by the powerful and the rich, reflecting new types of social conflicts." Yang Guobin, 2008, 129.

### 5.1.1.1 Conflicts in Chinese Society

In *Tianya*, building on the strength of the youth reasonably means building on the values of this generation, which largely center on economic interest, social security and political equality.<sup>102</sup> Among the eight events in Table 5.1, two cases – Entrapment in Shanghai, and Kunming Luoshiwan – are associated with economic hardship or the national pursuit of economic interests; one case – Panyu Dump – is related to economic development; one case – Xu Baobao – is about social security; four cases – Wang Shuai, Deng Yujiao, Duo Maomao and The most arrogant wife of a colonel – target political power.

Each of these events exhibits an aspect of conflicts, while the actions for these events are in themselves a manifested challenge to democracy, freedom, social justice and so on, arising from social interaction with others, giving vent to ostracism, hatred, sympathy, friendship and love. In the two economic cases, it was the longstanding issue of the officials' inappropriate or illicit self-gains of economic interests through violating ordinary people's legal rights. In the case of environment protection, it was the lingering problem of local governments' asymmetric decision-making at the expense of public interest. In the social case, it was the bureaucrats' shielding and covering up for each other and the severe problems in the medical care system. In the two political cases, it was the misuse of political power, official-civilian conflicts, and

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<sup>102</sup> According to the China Internet Network Information Center's *Statistical Report of Internet Development* (July 2009), 61.5% of Internet users in 2009 are below 30. The prominent feature of these Chinese is their burning desire for economic interests. But a large proportion just focus on their jobs in real life and try their best to earn more money, while others are enraged by the difficulty to achieve success and the inequality in Chinese society, and choose to vent their anger online. So compared to non-participants in *Tianya*, participants express higher degree of attention to the social condition in China.

the low degree of participation. All of these events have increasingly intensified conflicts, scared and infuriated the masses.

### **5.1.1.2 Conflicts Generate Grievance**

The clash between social sections in multiple social areas tend to produce grievance when social actors reaffirm their repugnance at a common “enemy”<sup>103</sup>. But conflict in itself is not enough. It should be accompanied by participants’ deep belief in the existence and severity of that conflict to boost enduring grievance. The shared “enemy” from concrete examples threatening the values of a large population then breaks the vulnerable cohesion. In detail, the categorization of posts collected from *Tianya Zatan* in terms of the difference of their respective conflict and responding grievance is presented in Table 5.2.

The significance of grievance lies in its ability to reduce the costs of mobilization, especially when it cooperates with norms of reciprocity, such that good behavior is rewarded and bad behavior is punished, whether immediately or far away in the future. In contemporary China, public awareness of social responsibility and legal rights is still weak. Regardless of whether the question is, “What makes you decide to take part in *Tianya*?” or “What is the purpose of your participation in *Tianya*?”, no answer is or has similar meaning to “it’s my own right” or “it’s my responsibility”. *Tianyaers* are more concerned that “if I do not voice or fight for these victims, who knows

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<sup>103</sup> Such as the imperial examination system, a national brand, a search engine, the police, an online shop and so on.

whether it will happen to me or not next time”.

Table 5.2 Types of grievance responding to conflicts

Conflicts between	Types of grievance	No. of posts
No conflict	No grievance	388
Traditional and modern education	Educational shortcomings	5
Knowledge and morality		5
Education and economic interests		3
Western and Chinese education		4
Officials and citizens / state and society / the poor and rich / different jobs / law and power	Public power abuse	72
	Social insecurity	63
	Economic monopoly	26
	Social inequality	20
	Irrational policies	29
Radicals and rationalists	Social ignorance	23
Doctors and patients	Hospital malfeasance	17
	Corruption	5
Consumers and corporations	Business untrustworthiness	13
Economic interest and cultural value	Cultural backslide	5
	Cultural monopoly	9
Different schools	Cultural ignorance	9
Different countries	Foreign policy	3

This public grievance may become exaggerated by business entities when economic interest is involved. *Tianya* itself longs for both economic profit and social reputation. When a worker searches in *Tianya* for information on how to protect his legal rights in obtaining money from the contractor, communities copy this event and put it on the top so as to garner more clicks. Consequently, the active involvement of numerous

social actors attracts more participants and that, in turn, escalates the event. People with similar experiences are likely to form a shared identity over time, and that public “grievance” becomes socially constructed into social causes. Collective action takes place at some point when the controversy flares into a full-fledged social cause.

### **5.1.1.3 From Grievance to a Sense of “We”**

In rational choice institutionalism, there are three ways to create a sense of a shared “we” – authority, persuasion and transaction – and these are also tenable in *Tianya*, but in new forms. The impact of these methods varied from community to community, from one case to another, online to offline, and also during the course of any event.

Being more leftist by nature, *Tianyaers* seldom resort to authority for mobilization. Often, authority is challenged or resisted, since people in China regard the existing authority as having more power than legitimacy, as its power was bestowed or inherited. Among opponents, the common grievance toward central authority becomes aggregated into a sense of “we”. Netizens acknowledge that any perceived authority in *Tianya* comes from the online activists who contribute “group leadership” to collective mobilization, as explained in the next section.

In contemporary China, the disadvantaged shape the frames through which they perceive their grievances and collective action. On the one hand, the primary reference and purpose for their involvement is to resolve their fellowman’s social

problems and injustice. Living in a virtual society where deception permeates, the experiences of fellow netizens seem more trusted than pure propaganda perpetrated by the authority. *Tianya* seems to put this psychology to advantage in motivating waverers and lurkers. One example is seeking fame. Low cost and high publicity make *Tianya* the perfect place to introduce, “pack” and “sell” actors, particularly people without formal channels, insofar as the tactics are creative enough. Within its online community, the few rare successes are highly touted to stir others to action, due to the perceived homophily of ordinary netizens’ resources, positions and cyber-power. On the other hand, it is not out of participants’ virtuous objectives to benefit the disadvantaged, but rather, toward their own hierarchical power. This is one important reason for collective action – an exchange for better resources, especially for members whose social networks lack high-status officials. It also highlights group leadership in multiple opportunities for resistance.

### **5.1.2 Group Leadership**

The purpose for better resources or political positions as mentioned above implicates that media agents or online participants themselves may assume a key role in the courses of social events. The primary factor in this assumption is online activists – the group with more or better resources. In general, online activists have their fingers on the pulse of the community, mediating between the state and society. How they serve the common purposes through CMC is discussed below, mainly in two aspects: (1) they are grassroots participants able to freely interact with fellow netizens and easily

aggregate support from them; (2) they are also the elites at the upper end of “cyber-hierarchy”, capable of mobilizing ordinary people toward a unitary collective action competing with state power mainly by “applying subtle forms of pressure on followers”<sup>104</sup>. This section then focuses on how these activists, as a cohort of opinion leaders, frame possible solutions to diverse social problems.

### 5.1.2.1 As Grassroots Participants

Many of these famous web activists are the nondescript colleagues that surround us; or, as one noted: “Although I’m more active than many other *Tianyaers*, I’m just an ordinary netizen in this community”. Some bring their own unpleasant experiences to the public for support, advice, or emotional consolation, some respond to mass ideas, requirements and questions, and some write commentary or op-ed pieces. There are no telltale signs that distinguish them from ordinary netizens. Everyone is free to “talk” to and exchange attitudes with them similar to chatting with old friends face to face, perhaps even more frankly, their real life identities cloaked by cyberspace. In terms of resource creation and employment, there are fewer barriers between online activists and non-activists than that in real life. In *Tianya*, the boundary between activists and non-activists is blurred and constantly changing:

Everyday, I will receive emails asking for help via *Tianya* Message. Clearly, for these people, few other effective channels are available. So they contact me online. It can be seen that we are all equal online. (Interviewee 10)

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<sup>104</sup> O’Brien, Kevin J., and Rachel E. Stern, “Introduction: Studying Contention in Contemporary China”, in *Popular Protest in China*, edited by Kevin J. O’Brien (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 17.



These perceived homophilous relations make it easy to switch identities in *Tianya*: activists can act as ordinary netizens when they choose to, and lurkers can behave as activists when they are eager to share their thoughts; one can be an activist in one group, event, or occasion, but a non-activist in another. Experiencing the feelings, demands and preferences on both sides can generate multiple considerations, compassion and understanding among participants which, in the long term, could help form a shared identity, such as feeling sorry about the quality of milk powder for babies, hatred toward a corrupt government official, sympathy for a prisoner.

This feeling of “being equal”, along with the activists’ profound knowledge and experiences also created interest and engagement. One *Tianyaer* described as such:

After I read the works of these knowledgeable persons, like *Dangnian Mingyue* and *Wu Xianyun*, I decided to register as a member of *Tianya*. Because I found that there were so many intelligent people actively involving in communication in some sub-communities. In order to talk to them and share my views with them, I registered. I’m afraid I would not do that if they were not there. After registration, especially after talking with them, they were not my focus any more. I went everywhere in this community to find things I was interested in and eager to share my opinions. But I will notice and pay attention to them immediately whenever something special happens to them or they launch activities I find meaningful and interesting, simply because I believe that there is a kind of connection between us, and we share some values. (Interviewee 6)

But an activist’s withdrawal could also cause their followers to quit:

In cyberspace, any ID is a node, and the network is weaved by thousands of ‘nets’. Sometimes, when the node of him moves, many other nodes close to it are likely to be influenced. For instance, A, as one of my friends online, will certainly leave this space at the first

time when I stop participating in it. In fact, he is just an online friend that everyone may have. (Interviewee 17)

In this sense, “growing up” in grassroots communities, activists that are popular and have many followers, often find themselves wielding the baton of public opinion and becoming the center of social networks. Over time, they are perceived as elites.

But there are also exceptions due to community design and personal attitudes. On the one hand, well-functioned *Tianya* can preserve its stability by attracting netizens’ sustainable participation via all kinds of strategies. Those who believe that they have benefited from the participation will continue to be involved even if important elites leave *Tianya*. On the other hand, some people participate with strong personal standings, and they believe that:

Although I’ll feel a bit upset when some of these elites I’ve been familiar with leave *Tianya*, I’ll not just leave because of them. New elites will come and new hot topics will emerge thanks to their effort, to attract my attention. (Interviewee 10)

### **5.1.2.2 As Elites**

Compared with the real world, there are fewer barriers for non-activists to approach activists in *Tianya*; nevertheless, activists hold a higher cyber-status. Most of the time, activists indulge in creating resources, particularly knowledge in citizenship, social responsibility, social morality, government performance and so on, while non-activists employ these resources for personal purposes or make them available to friends. As the hubs of civic knowledge, online activists weaken the public’s heavy

reliance on official intellectuals and lop-sided hierarchical social ties. In the past, many elites in China enjoyed a close relationship with the government, making it difficult to form sincere and reliable social relations; the circle was impenetrable to those without power. Online activists are in a position above ordinary netizens, but that is a position acquired based on their predominant knowledge and skills.<sup>105</sup> In short, they gain their social status from public agreement. This is the prominent difference between traditional and digital “hierarchy”. The existence of moderate digital “hierarchy” motivates some netizens’ creation, for the purpose of obtaining higher position. In so doing, heterophilous networks mobilize collective actions on account of activists’ charisma and non-activists’ desire for better resources.

Often, participants find that an effective way to resolve their problems is to ask community moderators and online activists for help:

If someone messages me about his/her problems that are really important and meaningful to the community as well as ordinary members, I will do some kind of recommendation or put them on the top. It depends. (Interviewee 4)

My opponents always bribe the moderators to delete my posts or block my ID in some columns. (Interviewee 5)

There are a bunch of factors that affect the possibility of making some online posts popular and problems resolved, one of which is your connection with the community management. Your close relation with some moderators or activists will help you to attract others, and to a large extent, determines the success of your case. (Interviewee 9)

Many netizens ask us moderators to delete some negative posts or put some important posts on the top by promising some kinds of

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<sup>105</sup> “This can also be seen...because it allows the vast amounts of information generated in cyberspace to be ordered according to the quality of someone’s words and not their social or institutional position, their loud voice, gender, race or whatever. Those who gain recognition online and whose messages are automatically accorded some respect, reflecting a higher position in online hierarchies, may achieve this status through the quality of their writing.” Tim Jordan, *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet*. (London and New York: Routledge 1999), 81.

recompense like money. (Interviewee11)

It is about the power of networks among heterophilous groups. Once, I contacted a famous *Tianya* web commentator<sup>106</sup> about a participant's sad story about being disregarded by the social security system. Just as I had anticipated, he refused:

I have read this story, but I'm afraid I can't help him. His problem is an ordinary example of what most Chinese are now suffering from, rather than a very specific event. So it is difficult to mobilize other netizens for collective actions to help him. Maybe I can do something, but I don't think that could really resolve his problem.

Not surprisingly, there are also individuals and groups who prefer to work quietly in the background to promote specific events and social causes. But as one netizen says, "as long as they do it in accordance with the public opinion rather than misguide it, it is ok..." In addition, the freedom of moderators' choosing what to highlight and what to suppress is still limited, but much higher than that in real communities.

How does cyber-leadership help mobilize collective action in a seemingly authoritarian regime? Simply put, for activists themselves, social networks provide the opportunity to exert pressure on non-activists for cooperation – "I will go only if you go". The fear of being marginalized and abandoned makes ordinary members choose to follow the activists whenever possible. The oratorical skills of the leaders, the participatory design of the community and the characteristics of participants are crucial in promoting participants' belief in collective grievance and actions. In this

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<sup>106</sup> He has written dozens of posts commenting some social events, and most of his contributions turn out to be effective in drawing public attention and changing the courses of these events toward a relatively good end.

regard, group leadership determines which strategies could promote their mobilization, when and how to carry them out, when to stop, and what results they should strive toward.<sup>107</sup>

Even more, flexible networks provide participants with a sense of security. Collective action could be mobilized against authoritarian control, the incompetence of Chinese Communist Party, the corruption of government officials, and the plight of low-status people, using vitriolic words. In the past, they would have been arrested for “subverting the state”. Now, even though there are reported instances of many influential online activists being “invited by the Chinese government to have a cup of tea”<sup>108</sup>, fewer have been arrested. One reason could be that they are too popular among their “fans”, many of whom are also activists holding positions in diverse social sections.

I have made many friends through participation. And these brilliant and righteous friends, including, of course these working for traditional and new media, their help provides me wealth. Because of this wealth, I win and I am safe. Thanks to them. (Interviewee 15 – an activist)

The existence of these kinds of symbolic resources makes the networks between participants difficult to be broken, like a spider’s web. It can be expected that if the government arrests certain activists, the effects of CMC could easily penetrate into

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<sup>107</sup> The frequent use of metaphors and homonyms representing sensitive words, initiated by activists, such as *Duo Maomao* (hide-and-peek), *He Xie* (harmony), *Fu Wo Cheng* (push-up), *Qi Shi Ma* (seventy yards) and so on, are making CMC more frank, incisive, provocative and unsparing, under moderate security.

<sup>108</sup> “Having a cup of tea” is a specific expression in Chinese context meaning that the authorities are angry at what someone said or did, force him to go somewhere the government regulated, admit his mistake and promise that he won’t do it again.

offline life and China society would then be in chaos, the severity of which will be unimaginable. The government dare not take the risk. Thus, by initiating topics, leading discussions, and bonding dispersed individuals, web activists create a hybrid civic environment for collective identity sharing, a new identity neutralizing online idealism and offline realism. Especially when emergencies arise, group leadership increases the likelihood of connecting isolated individuals together, within the specific social environment.

### **5.1.3 Social Environment**

Whether considering structural constraints or cultural-political opportunity context, the process of collective mobilization occurs in the broader social environment. Compared with democratic countries, the relative weakness of China's civil society and the social networks of NGOs is often attributed to the dual influence of state manipulation and society concession. In authoritarian China, which is heavily dominated by patron-client relationships, the power to exclude ordinary citizens from decision-making is a crucial measurement of government performance and an indispensable tactic to keeping its political authority. Hence, wherever necessary, anti-hierarchical effects through CMC are stopped, and veracious mass media muzzled. Before the implosion of this information era, it was universally deemed by the public in China that no matter what they did and how much they contributed to the national economy, they were incapable of influencing government policies. What the government said was synonymous with the ancient imperial edicts.

After the long-term ill-performance of the Chinese government in providing civil services and protecting personal rights, today's citizens are less willing to abide by government policies perceived to be unfair. They radically criticize officials' corruption in BBS forums, write articles or reports analyzing the ingrained problems in Chinese institutions and blog about their worries for China's future. Regardless how much time they spend online, what types of applications they use, and with whom they cooperate, these Chinese netizens show a deep yearning for social transformation. But although citizens' CMC has, to some extent, changed this situation, the government's power will not disappear overnight.

Instead, government is still active in every corner of China's virtual society, in the form of consulting with ordinary netizens, watching their behaviors, and controlling their speeches. Nowadays, they find engagement an effective way to control anti-government behaviors. Both government officials and *Tianya* moderators say that the government designates "professionals" to monitor the activists it defines as such, and to search for potential activists all day long. Once someone has an intention to do things the government perceives as detrimental to its power, it will take action quickly. More strategically, the government takes the initiative in encouraging CMC to control its possible harm within a certain scope or even to use it for its own gains.

On the one hand, CMC is a good way to keep people online and off the streets. Every human being needs a channel to vent his negative and positive emotions within a

certain period of time. *Tianya* has proved itself to be one choice. After venting, the individual often calms down, which reduces the possibility of taking action that could be the consequence when their emotions cannot be released. As one government official noted: “If it is not here, it should be somewhere else. Then why not let them complain, argue, and accuse here on the Internet where we can see?” Seen in this context, CMC provides the basis for the state’s control over society. In most cases, collective actions take place only with the government’s permission, connivance, or even promotion. Only collective actions which the government permits as not disruptive to its control, will be welcomed; or, as O’Brien and Stern generalized, the “less sensitive themes, including anti-Japanese nationalism, the rights of the vulnerable, and local corruption, enjoy a degree of tolerance or, at least, indifference”<sup>109</sup>.

On the other hand, the government’s tolerance of CMC is a way to gain political legitimacy for itself while disrupting the process of empowering powerless groups. Partial relinquishment of one set of institutions in favor of another is inevitable in any country, which breeds “institutional vacuum” in the interim. This vacuum, that China is now undergoing, has undermined government’s legitimacy and increased social instability. By adjusting and refining its policies and trying to win back the public consent, the government is now finding solutions to increase its legitimacy. In the Duo Maomao-Case discussed in the next chapter, the establishment of the “Truth

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<sup>109</sup> Kevin J. O’Brien and Rachel E. Stern. “Introduction: Studying Contention in Contemporary China”. In *Popular Protest in China*, ed., Kevin J. O’Brien, 11-25. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 14.



Investigation Committee” exemplifies the government’s efforts to direct online activities into institutionalized channels. Through these endeavors, mobilization for collective actions has much to do with state-society relations.

Although few would admit it, in a culture deeply embedded in Confucianism, many Chinese citizens still accept government permission or institutional regulations as the only resource of legitimacy for collective actions<sup>110</sup>. When the government initiates certain collective action, participants feel safe and meaningful to participate, especially for these non-activists with few resources to rely on. However, netizens are not invited as co-decision-maker, but as the resources for officials’ decision-making. Hence, the practice could easily develop in the direction contrary to the government’s expectations. Online venting could escalate to more serious and uncontrollable collective actions when participants do not feel satisfied by what they have done and how the other side – individuals or organizations they are questioning – have reacted. It happened in the DMM-Case. CMC in *Tianya*, from this section, is far beyond supplementing face-to-face communication, or transcending group boundary for resource sharing.

## **5.2 Duo Maomao-Case**

The question this realm of investigation poses is: how is collective action effected in virtual communities? This section presents a case study into the alternative answers.

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<sup>110</sup> It is also the case according to “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Assemblies, Processions and Demonstrations”. Only these approved by governing organs are legal. Otherwise, organizers or people in charge of actions will be arrested.

Different from the formal models of collective action, this case shows a more dispersive, more spontaneous but still influential type. More specifically, it seeks the influences of CMC on the development, legitimacy, effectiveness, and participants' mobilization of collective action.

### **5.2.1 The Occurrence**

On February 8, 2009, a suspect named Li Qiaoming was injured and became unconscious while under prison custody in Jinning, Yunnan Province, and died on February 12. After formal investigation and verification, the public security and procuratorial departments in Jinning publicized it as an accident. Their version of the story: Li and several other prisoners were playing a game of "hide-and-seek" while in custody, during which they had a dispute and Pu (another prisoner) kicked Li in the chest and punched him on the left side of his head, which led to Li hitting his head on a solid door frame. After being informed of this investigation result, Li's family thought it was too rash and irresponsible, and even ridiculous since Li had been in good health all along. Information about this was posted online immediately, and 35,000 posts emerged online within hours of the event. Questioning and dissatisfaction spread and quickly escalated into an overwhelming tide of public anger.

Soon, sarcastic commentary or posts titled "Have you played 'Duo Maomao' today?", "Cherish your life, keep away from 'Duo Maomao'", "Who is going to be the next die

of ‘Duo Maomao?’” appeared online or were published on traditional media. Computer games named “Real Version of ‘Duo Maomao’” became popular. Cartoons describing governmental departments as ridiculous, and the malfeasance of violence within, came out one after another. At this stage, it was just an ordinary case. This death due to prison brutality was neither the first nor the last example in China. But it was escalated by diverse subjective and objective factors, the process of which was generalized into three stages: grievance accumulation against the government, the bifurcation of public opinion, and rational introspection from group leadership. The mechanisms are tested and shown in the chart below, generated from content analyses of posts that are highly related to Duo Maomao-Case (Figure 5.1).

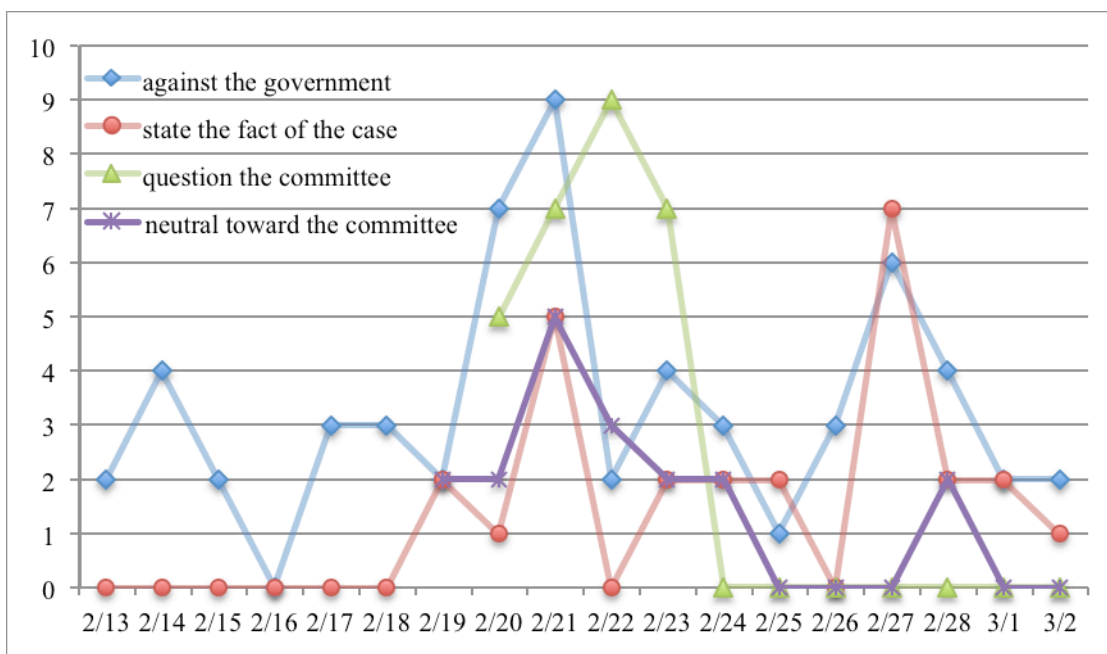


Figure 5.1 Daily posts on the Duo Maomao Case remained, *Tianya*, February 13 – March 2, 2009<sup>111</sup>

<sup>111</sup> There were 750 posts with the words “Duo Maomao” in the titles, archived in *Tianya*, till January 28, 2011. From February 13 to March 2, 2009, there were 131 posts highly related to the event. This thesis limited the study to the 131 posts within the 18-day period, as most of the posts were generated during this period. There were posts far beyond this time frame and highly related to the case, but they do not affect the general tendency of this figure.

## 5.2.2 Collective Mobilization Through CMC in the DMM-Case

### 5.2.2.1 Grievance Accumulation

The DMM-Case gave unfamiliar netizens a reason to “meet up” with similar anger at government ill-performance. Fundamentally, the public animosity towards the government is a historical problem highly related to the long-term misuse of public power.<sup>112</sup> But more directly, the local government made a mistake at the beginning, by covering up the accident under the guise of game playing. Few people believed the story, even though high status government officials had participated in the hearing of the case and took the initiative in opening up the process of the trial. To the public, anything publicized by the local government was problematic; or, as a *Tianyaer* said, “In whatever Cases, as long as government officials participate, it is their fault”.

Sina.com framed their survey question by asking, “What do you think of the DMM Event?” The findings, presented below, show that the public’s distrust in institutions is extremely high. Perhaps the public would have accepted this event as an ordinary accident had the government admitted that this had been caused by their negligence. However, the cover-up of the truth only led to more complaints and resistance.

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<sup>112</sup> As a professor from HUST (Huazhong University of Science and Technology) said, “The more profound reason is that some state organs attempts to equip themselves with wills independent from state will...At that time, these organs did not merely against the public but also national interest. They were not public agencies any more, rather, private organizations holding powerful public power.” Accessed January 24, 2011, at <http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2009-03-02/071417315729.shtml>.

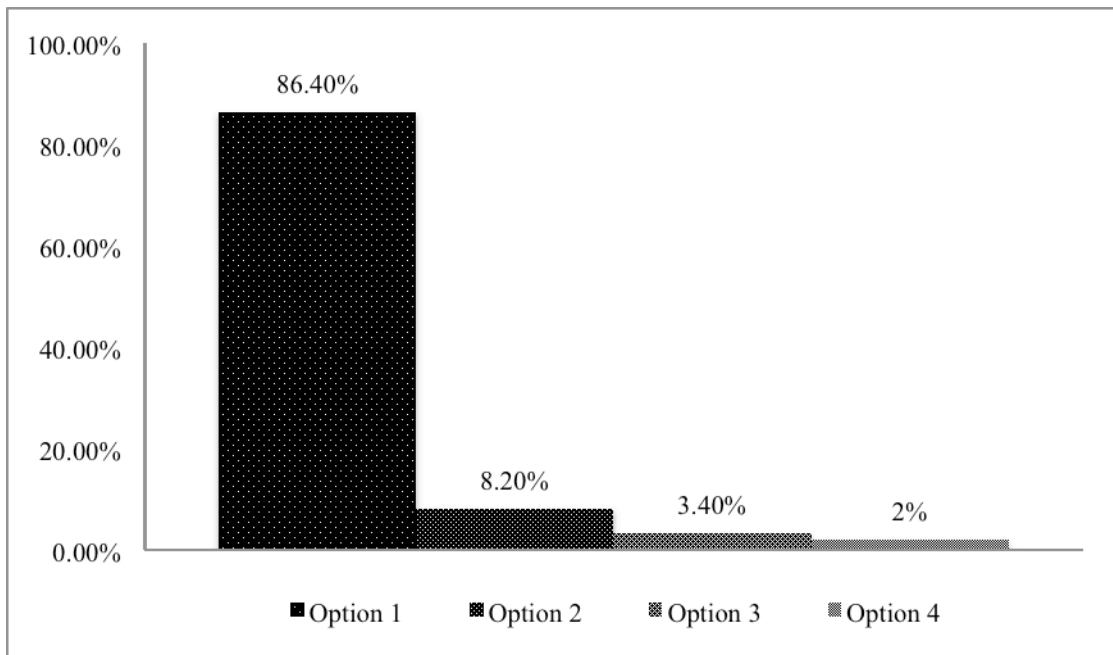


Figure 5.2 What do you think of the DMM event?<sup>113</sup>

To express their emotions, people carried out conversations, in the form of discourses based on texts, images, and videos. The charm of discourses was not from the degree of anger and resentment expressed by most netizens: “the higher the more attractive”, instead, it was from the tactic of using an uncolored tune to express violent feelings. In *Tianya*, every social issue can easily be transformed into a political issue through discourse. But direct conversation on these issues about their political implication was considered taboo. By adding a lighthearted tone to these issues, opinions were easily accepted by the masses, and considered effective and riskless. Many preferred and

<sup>113</sup> This figure was drawn according to the numbers of persons chose different options toward the question “What do you think of the DMM Event”, and it received 59153 answers in total. Option 1 was “Died from playing ‘*Duo Maomao*’ is incredible, it must be a lie”. Option 2 was “Although it is incredible, it might be true”. Option 3 was “It is hard to say”. Option 4 was “Died from playing ‘*Duo Maomao*’ should be the truth”. Online at <http://survey.news.sina.com.cn/result/30895.html>. Accessed on January 5, 2011.

appreciated this humorous style, regardless which group they were in, or what their interests were.

For instance, some commented on the game “Duo Maomao” using metaphors:<sup>114</sup>

One teacher said, “Boys and girls, today, we’re going to play Duo Maomao.” As a result, all the flowers of our motherland pissed their pants.

From now on, families with children should stop them playing Duo Maomao. So dangerous! Education must start from childhood.

I suggest providing each prisoner a networked computer to play Red Alert, Warcraft or login *Tianya* when they have nothing to do. Then, their lives could be saved.

Some were aiming at human rights,

We Chinese citizens are legally enjoying our freedom of playing Duo maomao, Push-up<sup>115</sup>, and being the masters of ourselves, so happy.

The detention house has paid so much attention to “human rights” and was so humane to the prisoners by allowing them playing games with their eyes blindfolded, so talented!

And others said,

The policeman would say, “Anything you can imagine, we can make it real”.

The use of black humor made people relax in these online conversations, while leaving room for political thinking on law, governance, and institutions in private. It has much to do with Chinese social culture that was totally against any direct anti-authority speeches while tolerating periphrastic words. When silenced people are

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<sup>114</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/1507781.shtml>. Accessed January 25, 2011.

<sup>115</sup> The expression originated from another social event about a female student’s abnormal death.

involved in conversations, that is, in itself, a manifestation of power decentralization or resource redistribution, not least because it fosters social connection.

The media companies — *Tianya* — were also involved in stirring up further communication among sympathizers. Some government officials and media workers the author interviewed confirmed that many high-profile social events had become well known and penetrated into offline action by virtue of media companies' propaganda, as in the Duo Maomao-Case. As a business company, *Tianya* pays great attention to making profit and gaining reputation. As a social media, *Tianya* also makes effort in uncovering any information behind and taking responsibility for public welfare. For both purposes, *Tianya* uses diverse market strategies.

To catch people's attention, all news emphasized the word "Duo Maomao", indicating just how ridiculous and irresponsible the Yunnan Provincial Government (YPG) was. As expected, thousands of *Tianyaers* criticized it as an excuse to avoid condemnation. Almost all posts there about this event said that they did not believe that a strong young man could die of playing DMM while in prison custody. The feeling of being badly cheated by the government inflamed the public and led directly to their scathing denouncement that it had to be stopped at that time.

Besides the usage of impressive words, moderators in some sub-communities have contributed a lot using their cyber-power. One moderator in “Media Arena”<sup>116</sup> noted:

At the very beginning, the information provider of DMM-Event contacted us immediately after he/she posted this event, hoping that we can publicize it effectively. After evaluating the value and importance of this case, we put it on the top of the front page. Technically, top posts will attract much more clicks than other posts without doubt, because of convenience and psychological belief. Moreover, we asked many traditional media, using our own relation sources, to uncover this event and many experts in law to analyze it. (Interviewee 14)

What ordinary netizens see are just all kinds of posts written by people they do, or do not, know. Once engaged in the case, they care about nothing but how the case itself develops. Even more, one media company’s engagement caused a Domino effect: multiple websites, newspapers and magazines and even instant messaging copied or reproduced the piece of information within days, arousing strong public pressure which, in turn, promotes people’s active participation and forces the government to respond quickly. Moderators always manipulate the agenda: they decide on the topics first, and then invite honored guests to communicate with ordinary netizens.

However, a media company’s selfish consideration is seldom accused. Most online activists know the existence of “*Wu Mao Dang*” (five-cent party), netizens who are hired or selected by the government to direct public opinion and exculpate the government from all kinds of evils. They also know the existence of a similar group of people hired by media companies to gain clicks, popularity and money. While the

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<sup>116</sup> A sub-community of *Tianya Forum*.



government's main objective is to moderate the contention, the purpose of media companies is to stir, and intensify, conflicts. This public opinion bias facilitates collective mobilization.

### **5.2.2.2 The Bifurcation of Public Attention**

Much later, the government's efforts in relieving the pressure of public opinion in effect promoted it, as shown in Figure 5.1. On February 19, a notice in the name of YPG's Propaganda Bureau was issued online, expecting to form an investigation committee including netizens in response to Internet-fuelled outcry and public quest to ascertain the truth. It is this measure that caused the case to develop into an unprecedented social event overnight, both online and offline. According to social movement theory, the success of collective action depends on "political opportunity structure" from the outside, which was made possible in this case. As a director in one department of Internet regulation in China said, "If the YPG did not take this strategy, this event was quite likely to be submerged by they public online and resulted in ignorance". Till that evening, approximately 510 netizens had applied for this committee. Ultimately, through selection upon the priority in time, a semi-official investigation committee with eight netizens, four government officials and three media workers was set up (Table 5.3).

Table 5.3 Members of Investigation Committee<sup>117</sup>

Group	Name	Position
Government official	Fu Xiao	Provincial Committee of Political and Legislative Affairs
Government official	Pu Ze	Provincial Procuratorate
Government official	Liu Zhen	Public Security Bureau in Kunming
Government official	Guo Bin	Public Security Bureau in Kunming
Media worker	Wang Yan	Yunan Branch of Xinhua News Agency
Media worker	Wang Lei	Yunnan Information News
Media worker	Yang Zhihui	Yunnan Net
Netizen	Nickname: Fengzhimoduan Real name: Zhaoli	Website Editor (Committee Director)
	Nickname: Bianmin Real name: Dongrubin	Website Editor (Committee Deputy Director)
	Real name: Peng Guojing	A company of Science and Technology
	Nickname: Wen Xing Real name: Wen Yuanzhao	Website Moderator
	Real name: Wang Yingwu	Insurance salesman
	Real name: Ni Ling	Students from college
	Nickname: Nengshijiang	Freelancer
	Nickname: Jibu Real name: He Xinwen	Website Editor

More importantly, fierce debates on its legitimacy and the fairness of selection, especially by many jurists, were triggered within the contemporary Chinese legal framework. For Max Weber, the three resources of legitimacy are “charismatic authority”, “traditional authority” and “rational-legal authority”<sup>118</sup>. None of these could be applied in describing this investigation group. Organizations and institutions

<sup>117</sup> For geographic convenience, these committee members are all from Yunnan Province.

<sup>118</sup> Weber, Max, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (The Free Press and the Falcon's Bring Press, 1947), 325-328.

with legitimacy are ignored or violated by many government officials, let alone those without. In addition, although the deputy director “*Bianmin*” said in the investigation report, “Please do not underestimate our netizens’ legal knowledge, I have handled more than ten lawsuits, and Wen Xing is a famous local law journalist”<sup>119</sup>, it was clear that none of them was an expert in law, which inevitably limited their capability in seeking the truth. As a temporary group without hierarchical support and formal power, how can it compete with a governmental department? Will government officials take these passionate netizens seriously and let them do real investigation? Queries were inevitable.

As can be seen in Figure 5.1, as a result, between February 19 and 23, 2009, public opinion changed from criticizing the local government to questioning both the government and committee members, including their identity, representativeness, capability and so on. Comments in the committee director’s post include<sup>120</sup>:

It is definitely not a show, but a fake. If certain secretary of political and legislative affairs committee does this investigation, it is a show. But asking *Wumao* to pretend to be “netizens” is a fake, a-hundred-time more abominable than a show. (Netizen ‘mountdew’)

You humiliate my IQ! I would like to suicide with a bean curd! (Netizen ‘xueshnfeiyign’)

They humiliate our IQ first, and then our personality. (Netizen ‘dongfangdawei2008’)

Biggest news: the investigation committee members seem to be *Wumaos*... (Netizen ‘Feiooo’)

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<sup>119</sup> Online at <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/1512040.shtml>. Accessed on September 29, 2010.

<sup>120</sup> Online at <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/1507781.shtml>. Accessed on January 25, 2011.

Public attention to government malfeasance, although not completely diverted, diminished after February 21, 2009. It is not clear why public opinion changed, but the establishment of the committee was probably a crucial factor. Many people believed that it was just a show the government played to appease the angry public. Even more, angry masses criticized these “selected” committee members as accomplices in covering up the truth. Sina.com’s survey findings to the question, “What do you think of Yunnan Government’s invitation of netizens”, are presented below. It shows that the majority of netizens doubted the legitimacy or efficacy of this committee. But public grievance against committee members was much lower, compared with their attitudes toward the event itself.

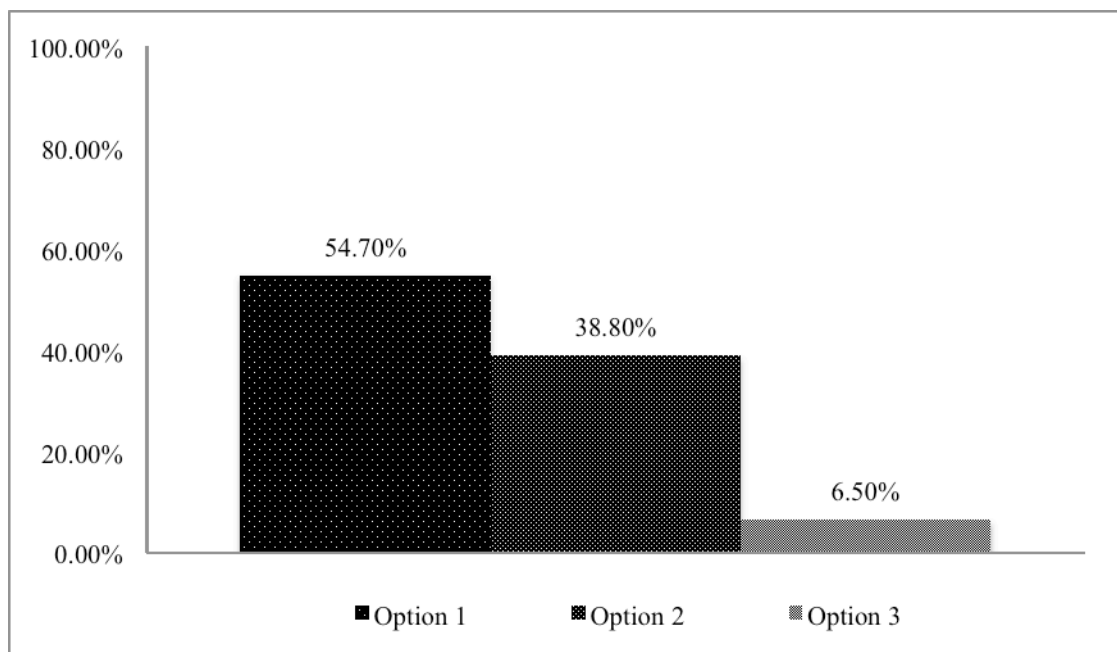


Figure 5.3 What do you think of Yunnan Government’s invitation of netizens<sup>121</sup>

<sup>121</sup> This question also received 59153 answers. Option 1 was “The investigation committee seems to be a show, and the role of netizens in it is doubtful”. Option 2 was “It is creative, and it can expand democracy and show the openness and transparency of the investigation”. Option 3 was “It is hard to say”.

Many more people believed that these netizen representatives were real, but may have been misled by the government:

As a criminal case, it should have its own task force of local police. Then, you should think carefully about what's the feature and purpose of this 'investigation committee'. Pay attention, the organizer is the propaganda department, which seems has little to do with investigation of the case... It makes people doubt that it is just the strategy of the Yunnan Provincial Propaganda department to escape from the great public pressure, especially online pressure, and let this ridiculous investigation committee to undertake it. If it really wants you to participate, several things should be allowed to do, as I think... (Netizen 'shazhude9966')<sup>122</sup>

Online disputes intensified to a peak around February 20, 2009.

Under this circumstance, the formation of heterophilous networks was shelved and the quality of these networks was challenged. But homophilous networks based on strong cynical viewpoints seemed to be strengthened. Many of these netizens in the committee, at least the director and deputy director, were previously online activists with better resources whom ordinary members respected and had good relations with. According to Table 4.2, activists' active creation with public-centered purposes breeds heterophilous, and weak relations between them and non-activists. Their involvement in this committee, which lacks legitimacy and representativeness and must directly contact with government officials, reduces the effectiveness of collective action. Collective identity between non-activists and activists at this stage was difficult to foster.

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<sup>122</sup> Online at <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/1507219.shtml>. Accessed January 6, 2011.

### **5.2.2.3 Rational Introspection Benefited from Group Leadership**

All of the committee members visited the prison on February 20, 2009. On behalf of millions of netizens all over China, they still bore the public's eager expectation as the first attempt. But the result turned out to be disappointing as predicted. After one day's investigation, they wrote an online report on the success and failure of their action. They were very excited when informed of being selected and full of fantasies about the coming action. However, when the committee began to work, all of them felt embarrassed. Although they did get a lot of information others had never known before, they were pained at their inability to get to truth. The local government refused their request to view the surveillance video about Li's cellmates and detained suspects. They suddenly felt that netizens who had been so powerful and popular online were powerless in real life. In law, only the judicial department had the power to expose wrongdoing using legal resources. Hence, social insecurity and corruption was quotidian; or, as one put it, "Even if it is informed that the man is died of a cat's stretching, we still could do nothing, not to mention died of 'eluding the cat'".

Although not all netizens appreciated their efforts, their sincere words had, at the very least, won them public understanding. Rational analyses and serious warnings from levelheaded online activists gradually redirected the public's attention. Figure 5.1 shows that the public's questioning of the investigation committee had stopped from February 24, 2009. Three days later, on February 27, 2009, the YPG held a press conference announcing the government's decision; public criticism against

government malfeasance aggregated again, and neutral comments on this case increased, but there were no longer any comments on the committee, whether positive or negative. According to some replies:

The intention was good, but netizens can only be positioned as surveillants while the mass media as the watchdog instead of Pekingese. Please continue the supervising, and don't ignore the principles of continuous monitoring and criticizing because of a 'tourism-oriented' investigation committee. That's the key. (Netizen 'mountdew')

There are many SBs in *Zatan*. They care more about whether Bianmin and Nengshijiang are *Wumao* than the truth of the event itself. Their logic is beat down Bianming and Nengshijiang first by labeling them as "Wumao", and then discuss about the truth of the homicide. (Netizen 'Beipiaozouzu')

Especially in one netizen's reply to the aforementioned netizen feiooo's critics:

You've confused ah! This is not the problem. If you interpret this event in this aspect, they just become scapegoats of certain persons. (netizen 'huangshangdehuang')

After careful consideration, public opinion changed into a competition between hatred and understanding, of YPG and the Public Security Organ.

Even though the investigation committee was not effective, we cannot conclude that it had failed. This first attempt made unexpected achievement. First of all, it enhanced the resource available to the members and to others. For instance, to show their sincere intention and to enhance fellows' trust in them, almost all these representatives announced their real names and occupations (see Table 5.3). It gave others easy access to their personal characteristics, morality, and responsibility, and approaches to interact with them. For the committee members, the reward was symbolic, such as fame.

Moreover, cooperation with traditional media brought about new possibilities for resource transaction. On the one hand, socio-economic modernization has changed the nature of mass media in China, but only slightly. On the other hand, globalization and marketization have enhanced group consciousness of civic engagement. Also, the position of traditional media in people's public life is undergoing challenges while the role of new media, particularly the Internet, is becoming even more influential. But in the near future, traditional media will not be replaced, since they hold significant social resources that new media are not able to acquire. For this reason:

For many citizens, only information provided by traditional mass media is true and trustworthy. And only events reported by them will be taken seriously by the government, and later, be resolved. It is decided by the Chinese national condition. The Internet emerged later. Many Chinese people have not accepted it psychologically yet. No matter how fierce online debate is, they think it is just squalling or faked news. (Interviewee 14)

Hence, their cooperation – the Internet, to quickly spread information; and traditional media, to increase the reliability – which facilitates resource exchange, eventually increases the power of mass media, creating sufficient alarm to force the government to react.

Not surprisingly, resource redistribution was translated into social relation changes between non-activists and activists, between activists and government officials and among activists. The relationship between non-activists and activists is based primarily on their common hatred in the authority, as demonstrated in the famous maxim, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”, and their need for each other – non-activists need activists' resources to carry out their desires, while activists need



non-activists' support. The relationship between activists is born from a desire to cherish each other. Finally, the last type is controversial, such as that between committee members – Fengzhimoduan, Bianmin, Wenxin – and the deputy secretary of YPG – Wu Hao.<sup>123</sup> Because of the lack of a strong group leadership, further interaction or a fierce collective action did not take place.

### **5.2.3 Termination of the DMM-Case**

The announcement of official punishment that catered to public opinion ultimately stopped the debate. On February 25, 2009, the case was transferred from Jinning County to Kunming People's Procuratorate supervised by Yunnan Provincial People's Procuratorate. The Supreme People's Procuratorate in China sent its officials to conduct the investigation. Two days later, YPG Press formally announced the truth: Li was punched to death by prison gangs in the name of playing DMM.<sup>124</sup> Afterward, relevant government officials were sentenced, just as the public had expected. According to current institutions and previous experience, it was impossible. The public succeeded in changing government decision-making and its hierarchy structure, creating the potential for a more egalitarian conclusion.

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<sup>123</sup> According to *Wen Xin's* log on his personal blog, relationship with Wu Hao is a kind of netizenhip, rather than arising from any kind of hierarchy. Online at [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_48dbe8570100cwex.html?tj=1](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_48dbe8570100cwex.html?tj=1). Accessed January 6, 2011. This log also shows the cooperation of different types of CMC, including posting in public forums, blogging, instant messaging and so on, which facilitates the formation of heterophilous relations.

<sup>124</sup> It also announced that five relative government officials had been punished politically, either dismissed or recorded of major demerit. Online at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2009-02-27/212317303974.shtml>. Accessed January 25, 2011. This result is meaningful since prison gangs represent the advantaged in real life. That is why the public became angry at this case immediately after the announcement. In fact, the contradiction between the advantaged and disadvantaged still remains the main origin of social instability and conflicts.

Since then, abnormal deaths in prison have been paid considerable attention, and the administration bureau of public security organ began gradually to open local detention houses to the public. But frankly, in this case, CMC ended up not being able to change government police directly, but to push it indirectly. With the publication of the truth by trustworthy mass media, netizens that gathered around this topic redirected their attention to other social hotspots. They continue to log in *Tianya* for information they need and communicate with others. Over time, an atmosphere of critical engagement and free expression is likely to be built bit by bit.

During the period, thousands of posts generated on popular national websites everyday in China, most of which were clicked millions of times. The significance of this phenomenon lies in the possibility of forming special interest groups. Expressing individual complaints on certain issues in *Tianya* is likely to turn the topic into a public debate that can foster collective identity. The content of personal values has undergone gradual changes in this era, from heroism to citizenship, belonging and social solidarity. To defend these values attached to CMC, they organize web-based alliance and take action. Once moved from virtual communities to real life, online activism evolves into practical public crisis.

So it may well be that the insertion of CMC into social relation building becomes an irreversible process, and the altered nature of collective mobilization indicates that the trajectories of collective action have also been changed. Previous evidence shows that

neighborhoods form the communities in agricultural societies, while workplaces played the same role in industrializing societies. Therefore, in digital societies, virtual community is where brand-new types of communication are being built to accumulate social capital.

## Chapter 6

### Discussion and Conclusion

#### 6.1 Mechanisms Summary

This thesis centers on how people's involvement in CMC contributes to both psychological and relational dimensions of social capital, in the absence of the rule of law and independent NGOs. In synthesizing the roles of CMC and virtual community, this thesis combines resource mobilization theory that stresses resource availability with social psychology theory that emphasizes emotional and cognitive feelings, identity and culture. Theoretical discussion on the two elements generalizes aspects regarding to the detailed mechanisms: resource distribution, relation building and collective mobilization.

For clarity and concreteness of discussion, I chose to base my empirical data on *Tianya*, a well-known Chinese virtual community. Established in 1999, *Tianya* has become "a weather vane of public opinion" among both traditional and new media in China. I was curious: what crucially drives the active participation in *Tianya* and the initiation of collective action in real life? My focus here is on community participatory design, structure and quality of social networks and community members, social context and government attitudes. A crucial methodological point this paper shares with many other researches is that "it was human beings who used these technologies in creative ways and under special historical circumstances that

have made modern Chinese politics more public, not the technologies alone”<sup>125</sup>. Through ethnographic investigation, Chapter 4 taps strategically into the first two mechanisms of social capital formation, reflecting the spontaneity, complexity and uncontrollability of CMC in the age of globalization.

Chapter 5 then discusses the third mechanism — collective mobilization — and interprets the DMM-Case in detail to test these propositions. First of all, CMC in *Tianya* redistributes social resources transcending official boundaries in two aspects: the creation of new resources, and employment of existing resources. In both situations, political decentralization is selective due to the political regime and social context in China. To survive under stringent state censorship, participants have to behave cautiously and make a proper trade-off between state censorship and public requirement; or, in other words, between personal security and communicational effectiveness. One distinctive contribution of CMC in virtual communities is the tendency to assign resources to those most needed or qualified, either inside or outside the community.

Secondly, relations among different social actors rebuild because of variation in resource availability. In this section, I have shown that the structure and quality of new relations depend not only on resource usage, but also on participatory purposes. This is diagrammatically presented in Table 4.2 in four combinations. When the

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<sup>125</sup> Zhou, 2005, 9.

purposes or ways of usage change, so do the forms of social relations. Different forms have different advantages and disadvantages, can be used on different occasions, and will result in different outcomes. In general, although online relations are more dispersive and intangible, they are also more stable in terms of being challenged by government strategies. Along with structural changes, interest-based shared identity and a sense of community change as a result of historical inheritance and CMC.

Thirdly, involvement in events representing real-problems and with a minimum level of concreteness may be mobilized for collective action, generalized from the discussion of the top eight Internet-initiated events in 2009. I identified three key determinants that translate CMC and relations formed through it into collective actions: collective identity, group leadership, and social environment. Identity in this section is treated as a cognitive process that can generate a sense of “we”. The indispensability of group leadership in collective mobilization is articulated in seeming homophily but essential heterophily between non-activists and activists. The most significant aspect — heterophily — is manifest in how group leaders frame public understanding of a problem and alternative solutions to determine whether, and how, collective actions will be carried out.

If CMC is the effort to bring real-life thorny issues into cyberspace for public attention and support, offline action is the process to bring virtual interaction into real-life context for effectual action. In authoritarian China, this offline-online-offline

loop is a powerful way to enable connection reformation across boundaries; as a consequence, the state has to change its policies to satisfy the public, or nationwide upheavals could occur. And this time, national upheavals are hard to be overwhelmed, at least not as easy as that during the 1989 Tiananmen student movement.

## **6.2 Implications for CMC and Social Capital**

The mechanisms that demonstrate the effects of CMC on social capital may also be used to support other ways of participation in the future. The virtual community is not the only platform; new forms such as Twitter or micro blog in China seem to be substitutes. Although virtual communities derive great power in influencing people's daily life nowadays, just as TV did in the second half of the last century, as a product of technological development, it must surely appear normal: new techniques of usage are born and flourish, while old ones vanish or weaken. Hence, the importance of CMC does not lie in the technology itself, but in the ways we devise to use it.

As McClurg argues, although "social resources may close the participation gap that exists between low and high status individuals", it could also breed social gaps as a result of their education, profession, knowledge and so on. It is understandable that some online social interactions may lead us to associational action, while others may lead us nowhere at all. However, in general, in the China context, it helps to bridge social relations with inactive or weak voluntary social organizations, moving it toward a better participatory culture. Future research could look into what types of

gaps are being built in this information era and how will they affect associational life.

Cautiously, the assumptions here build on the fact that the average level of social capital in China is relatively low compared to democratic countries. In addition, social capital is no longer greatly emphasized as a panacea in challenging state control in the midst of transition. But it is a crucial element in developing democratic order in China, as does the Internet. For example, the increase in online participation could improve opportunities for netizens to manage their own affairs and influence government policies, while at the same time strengthening the role played by state power branches in Internet governance. As many experts on Chinese politics suggest, how the authority reacts to online activism or how online participation affects political agenda are worth investigating in the future.

However, we should not be lured into the belief that other ways are necessarily better; were they to be put under the same scrutiny as mobilized over the last few years, they would most probably be found just as wanting. The slightest hint of a deficiency does not make the facilitating of social integration impossible. Gaps can be filled or narrowed and the expectation could well come true in the future, through the development of CMC. By exploring the mechanisms within certain limitation, it is possible to provide useful information for the construction of civil society and bottom-up democratization in China.



### 6.3 Limitations

The ethnographic account of social capital transformation through CMC does provide a unique angle for understanding this topic, but it also has many limitations. First of all, qualitative data cannot be generalized to the entire Chinese population or even virtual environment since  $n$  value is small and the selection of interviewees is non-random. But discussion about *Tianya*, as the largest and most active virtual community in China, could contribute to a general understanding of CMC and the contentious sphere based on it.

The most conspicuous feature of CMC is that spontaneous conversations which are frowned upon in traditional communities, online NGOs and many other organizations, actually facilitate resource exchange, produce real conversations, and breed the feeling of engagement as an essential part of daily life. These loose coalitions or groups through pro-individualist CMC are increasingly substituting for well-organized formal organizations. But this strength can also be read as a shortcoming: without strong incentives or group leadership, it is extremely hard to organize effective collective action through CMC. This is even more so in contemporary China, where it is still illegal for people to organize social movements without official permission, which makes Internet-based mobilization risky.

Another problem lies in the discord between CMC and collective action: people engaged in online activities may choose not to take part in offline actions, while

people who take collective actions may not participate in online conversations. This inconsistency between cognition and behavior makes it hard to measure the exact causal mechanisms of CMC on social capital. But it connotes the diversity of CMC, which is a significant contributor to resource distribution and relation building. Evidence from interviews suggests that many online activists have participated in at least one event, even if it is not the one they discussed online.

Although many *Tianyers* have discussed some personal and collective benefits from the proliferation of CMC, whether sharing general patterns or showing particular features, there are still a sizeable number of waverers engaging in online conversations e.g., waging guerilla warfare. For these, their focus is not to obtain resources or build. Moreover, to these non-activists or non-netizens, virtual community is still a world of illusion and imagination with little reality:

Many netizens use typed symbols to denote different kinds of emotions. As a newbie once in one community, I cannot understand what others are talking about, because there are all kinds of strange and special words in their posts, which can only be understood by people within their circles. So I quitted. And now, I find that these virtual communities are just something out of these participants illusion. Will they help a lot with our daily life? I don't think so. (A non-netizen)

This problem also displays the weak online-offline connection, which impedes the process of effective grasping individuals in isolation and mobilizing actions. Furious form of CMC happens when it penetrates into the offline life. At the very least, mobilization turns out to be more effective and sustainable when cooperated with

real-life mass media. As an aspirant moderator believes:

The contemporary major task of developing *Tianya* Virtual Community is to evolve online friends to offline friends, and help offline citizens adapt to online life. Certainly, both sides are very contradictory to it. But finding the approach to ‘tangible’ virtual communities is of great importance and value. (Interviewee 2)

The limitation in the study of DMM-Case lies in two aspects: firstly, I did not directly take part in online conversations about “Duo Maomao” then and there; secondly, I failed in my attempt to secure interviews with these committee members after trying several times. The lack of direct participation keeps me away from the effervescence of CMC and disenables socialization into the participatory culture. Besides, I noticed the apprehension and unwillingness of the committee members to talk about the investigation committee anymore. It also displays that preexisting relations is of serious concern to CMC. I believe that if I could have interviewed at least one of the committee members, I could have obtained more vivid information for this analysis. However, four members’ reports on their investigation, posted in *Tianya*, offered first-hand material on the case and provide sufficient material for discussion.

This paper addresses only a few aspects on the central lessons of socio-Internet pattern I believe to have noteworthy applicability and effects in China. Afterward, the relationship between the two is still indeterminate. More importantly, the next agenda should be on how to develop dispersed online event-based interaction into organized routine communication and action aimed at gradually transforming the society as a whole. In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that no simple answers exist for these

complicated processes and concrete examples. I only hope that this paper has provided refreshing perspectives on this controversial topic.

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## Appendix A.

### An Outline of Interview Questions

#### 1. Background information

Age:

Education:

Immigrants or not:

Occupation:

#### 2. Knowledge about *Tianya*

- 2.1 How long have you been a member of *Tianya*, how often do you visit *Tianya*, and how much time do you spend there each time?
- 2.2 What does virtual community mean to you? (Information center, gathering place...)
- 2.3 What kind of power do you have in *Tianya*? Or what can you do here?
- 2.4 What kind of power do you want to have, besides what you currently have?
- 2.5 What do you know about community rules?
- 2.6 Do you feel free in *Tianya*? Have your posts ever been blocked or removed by webmasters in *Tianya*? How did you react?

#### 3 Participatory Purposes

- 3.1 Why did you decide to take part in virtual communities, rather than real communities? How do you deal with anonymity, pseudonymity?
- 3.2 What do you do in *Tianya*, and for what purposes? Do you participate in any other virtual community besides *Tianya*? (If yes, which ones? What are the differences between *Tianya* and other communities? If not, why not? Why do you choose *Tianya*?)
  - 3.2.1 Get information: what type of information?
  - 3.2.2 Communicate with others: mostly with friends or strangers? Why not do the same things with your schoolmates or colleagues in real life?
  - 3.2.3 Uncover some dark things in this society: mainly in which aspects? Why do you do that through the Internet or *Tianya*? What is your main concern?
  - 3.2.4 Protect personal rights: what kinds of rights?

#### **4 Resources gained through *Tianya***

- 4.1 Most of the time, do you consume resources or create resources? (These resources could be long-term *guanxi* resources, or instant help...)  
Respectively, what kind?
  - 4.1.1 Consume resources: where, and how, do you try to get them?
  - 4.1.2 Create resources: how do you create? (analyze something, make videos?)
  - 4.1.3 What did you do when your purposes cannot be realized in *Tianya*? (e.g., the resources you needed cannot be obtained in *Tianya*, or the resources you created were not highly recognized or welcomed by others?)
- 4.2 Through online participation, what do you feel? Any change in your life? Did you get or lose something? Materially or spiritually?
- 4.3 Did you share these resources with anyone? What was their reaction? Can you give an example?

#### **5 Relationship between individuals**

- 5.1 How do you perceive strangers in *Tianya*? (scores accumulated through behaviors, position in *Tianya*, followers, or through direct online communication...)
- 5.2 How do you interact with people online? Is there any difference in interaction between different groups of people? (depth, using applications...)
- 5.3 Have you made any good friends online? Can you give an example of how it happened?
- 5.4 Have you ever experienced any difficulty or trouble in communicating with anyone based on differences in social status, knowledge or interest?
- 5.5 Has the knowledge or interest barrier prevented you from building relationships with them? How?
  - 5.5.1 How did you get around the difficulty?
  - 5.5.2 How did you resolve it?
- 5.6 Have you ever been persuaded by others in *Tianya*? How did that happen?
- 5.7 How are your online interpersonal relations, compared with traditional social relations? More dispersive, flexible, powerful?
- 5.8 Do you feel more connected to others, or more isolated or individualized?

## **6 Mobilization for collective action through virtual communication**

- 6.1 Have you ever participated in any collective action?  
If no, why not? If yes, answer the following questions.
- 6.2 What is the most important factor in mobilizing your active participation in collective action? (discourse-driven, market-driven, or government-driven) Can you give an example?
- 6.3 What is the main impact (or change) on you before and after the action? (Towards the community, towards people, or your personal value system...) How did it happen?
- 6.4 What are the main changes in your group, especially the subtle relations among your group members?
  - 6.4.1 Do you keep contact with each other now?
  - 6.4.2 What is the basis of your relationship?
- 6.5 What is the most serious difficulty in carrying out this collective action or in making it successful?
  - 6.5.1 Why would you stick with the cause in the face of problems?
  - 6.5.2 How would you proceed with other members?

## **7 Would you perceive yourself as an activist? Why?**

## **8 Do you know anyone you think is an online activist in *Tianya*?**

- 8.1 How did you know him/her?
- 8.2 What is your relationship with him/her now?