

# Theoretical Considerations of Studying the Chinese Web

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## 中文摘要

西方讨论和研究虚拟文化的理论如汗牛充栋。他们来自不同的理论传统和流派，而讨论的问题又涉及赛博文化（Cyberculture）的方方面面。本文并不涉及中国赛博文化的种种问题，如：新闻管制和自由表达、认同问题、社区建设等问题。本文试图说明，作为一种使用工具和作为一种生存空间，中国赛博空间（Cyberspace）的灵活性使学者们在研究中国赛博文化时，不能不考虑各种理论，探讨这丰富多彩的现象。

## Introduction

The vast majority of studies related to the Internet in China focus on the political and civil applications of its immense networking capability. There is a substantial body of this work that charts the strategies, values, aspirations, and fortunes of activists and their interplay with censors that is continually being updated as technologies change and as society, both online and off, evolves. However, the Internet, or more specifically the World Wide Web- hereafter to be known as the Web or cyberspace- is more than a communication tool for dissidents. Furthermore, it has been argued by Michel Hockx in his study “Virtual Chinese Literature: A Comparative Case Study of Online Poetry Communities” that because censorship is standard procedure in creative work produced in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), academics should accept it as being part of

the creative process- something that every writer, artist, and musician is aware of and works with (Hockx, 2005: 673). He argues that rather than focus on censorship, studies of the Chinese Web (and indeed Chinese literature) should instead discuss and analyse Chinese culture as it is produced within these bounds (Hockx, 2005: 671). Jack Liuquan Qiu claims that censorship is such an entrenched part of mainland Chinese culture, that ordinary citizens would not be comfortable travelling cyberspace without some form of state-imposed censorship (Qiu, 2003: 17). I do not interpret Qiu as believing that all Chinese Internet users enjoy government eyes peering over their shoulders as they type, but rather that state censorship has the function of regulating an otherwise anarchic environment. Of course, Internet regulation occurs in different guises all over the globe, but it is the thoroughness of the Chinese censorship system that sets it apart from other countries. Not only does the Chinese state dictate terms to both the end user and the Internet Service Providers, but individuals also exercise a high degree of self-censorship in Chinese cyberspace. In this regard, we must remember that all forms of public discourse are subjected to specific rules of communication. Accordingly, a thorough exploration and investigation of Chinese cyberspace should not restrict itself to viewing censorship as a purely antagonistic force, as a further extension of the rules implicit in acts of public communication.

This state of affairs is neatly summed up by Qiu, who writes that “the mainstream of China’s user population cares less about the grand narratives of modernity- rationality, liberalism, or ‘socialist democracy’- than subjects that can be discussed and celebrated, generating instant gratification for mass consumption” (Qiu, 2003: 14). This description could be used in the context of any of the common mass media of the globe today; television, film, radio, and print are more often saturated with gossip and light entertainment than debates over freedom of speech or the decline of civil society. The annual China Internet Network Information Centre Statistical Survey Report released in July 2007, clearly showed that the most common uses of the Internet were to access information (news 77.3%, search engines 74.8%), for communication (instant messaging 69.8%, email 55.4%), and for recreational purposes (online music 68.5%, online video 61.1%, Internet games 47%) (CNNIC, 2007: 39). The statistics also show that compared to United States users these recreational features of the Web are more widely used in China (CNNIC, 2007: 42). It would therefore appear that these features are an important part of the average Chinese netizen’s cyberspace experience, and therefore that they have potential to exert a strong influence over Chinese society. According to Andrew Herman and Thomas Swiss the Web was “largely unmapped in terms of contemporary cultural research” as late as 2000 (Swiss and Herman, 2000: 1). Although this has been somewhat rectified since then, it should come as no surprise that as far as the Chinese-language Web is concerned there is a similar dearth of material. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the theory produced on the Web in general and the Chinese Web in particular.

Because the Web is able to perform a variety of different functions and roles, and contains a number of different communities and characters, it is possible that a large range of theoretical concepts are applicable. Theory that can be explored includes: social and cultural studies of the Web; studies that focus on virtual communities; discussions of censorship and freedom of speech (which has included discussions on politically, socially, and culturally motivated censorship, as well as the legal

implications of censorship); philosophic and cultural studies texts that examine the interplay of people and machines or networks; sociology; studies in popular culture; and literary and critical theory.

## **Cultural and Social Evolution of Cyberspace**

There is a large amount of material produced that examines the cultural and social aspects of the English language Web. These studies provide a number of different methods for researching the Chinese Web as well as providing useful analysis and discussion of the features of the Web, how it has changed over time, and explanations of how these changes impact society. Socio-cultural surveys and discussions of issues endemic to network society were invaluable when it came to formulating methods of enquiry into the Web in general and the Chinese Web in particular. Manuel Castells provides a good overview and introduction to Web culture in the first two volumes of his three volume work *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*. In the first volume, *The Rise of Network Society*, Castells examines the countercultural origins of cyberspace culture, outlining its communal, utopian, and libertarian flavour (Castells, 2000: 385). Indeed, utopian/libertarian visions of cyberspace are a cornerstone of early Internet culture. Epitomised by John Perry Barlow's *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, these early ideals perhaps can be considered a reason for an initial obsession with the democratising capabilities of the Internet in the minds of commentators and world leaders alike (Kalathil and Boas, 2003: 2). Castells' work, although he does present some of the debates of the impact of the Internet on society such as the benefits and drawbacks of virtual communities, best reads as a history through which one can trace the development and changing nature of cyberspace as part of the larger story of the development of society throughout the Information Age. Castells' work is one that must be respected for its scope and insight, but with the rapid advancement of technology and accompanying critical debate it can no longer be considered the complete and ultimately authoritative text that it once was. To illustrate how *The Rise of Network Society* has dated, we need only look at Castell's discussion of online relationships and their social worth wherein he cites Harold Rhiengold's defence of their worth: "communities built online could develop into physical meetings, friendly parties, and material support for members of their virtual community" (Castells, 2000: 386). More recently, Hockx explains that authors of Chinese Web literature have the propensity to use the genre as a stepping stone to print creating a genre of print literature known as 'Web literature' (Hockx, 2005: 674). This shows that Web authors feel the need to be authenticated in print. This reveals in turn the weakness of literature online, for if the literature of such a culture cannot be self-sustaining, one must question both the worth of that literature and the culture in which it is based. Similarly, an argument in defence of virtual communities that sees them as a path to physical communities is not so much an argument in favour of virtual communities but an indication of their weaknesses as a social medium. Not only can physical meetings be developed from other forms of communicative media (implying that virtual communities are no more than an advanced postal system), but virtual communities must be able to sustain

themselves without needing to be authenticated in a physical environment to be considered a true community.

## **Cyberspace and Community**

Theresa M. Senft also provides a discussion of virtual communities in her article *Baud Girls and Cargo Cults*. Although the article does not restrict itself to the success and failure of virtual communities, this issue is an important part of it. To illustrate how a community become a success or failure, she compares one of each. She contrasts her experience as an employed online 'face' of Prodigy Internet with that of the community of Web sites that grew up in support of Louise Woodward, the British au pair accused of killing her charge in Boston. In essence, Prodigy Internet was unable to build a community based on brand loyalty, but the amateur Louise Woodward sites managed to build a community around the support o a certain cause- belief in the innocence of Woodward (Senft, 2000: 193). Whereas the Prodigy experience was an attempt to create an artificial community where there was neither need nor desire, the Woodward community (by which I refer to sites as part of a Web ring as well as contributors to those sites) was a spontaneous coming together of individuals who rallied around a cause and individual.

Web communities, particularly the use of Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) as a method of communication have been widely studied by scholars of the Chinese Internet. Karsten Giese investigates BBSs as a means of self-realisation and establishment of self-identity by acting as a public space in which the participants can experiment "with alternative identities be they negotiated alongside ethnic, regional, or local divisions, gender or sexual orientation, shared biographical experiences or political opinions" (Giese, 2004: 23). The use of mass media, e.g. newspapers and television, in the construction of identity is a concept that has been explored by many scholars in the past, including Benedict Anderson and Paul James. Giese himself refers to the employment of mass media by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to maintain "ideological and moral hegemony by providing every individual in every possible aspect of life with official interpretations of reality" (2004: 21). Thus, television, music, and films produced under close control of the CCP have been ideologically driven. Of course, one must remember that the 'reality' of the CCP of the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and so forth has changed dramatically, and so the content of these cultural products has also changed. In the increasingly commercialised environment that is contemporary China market forces play an increasingly important role and so a greater freedom in publishable content is allowed so long as they contain no direct challenges to party hegemony. Giese believes that the "growing influence of commercial, regional, and local TV stations broadcasting in local dialects, distinct regional, local, ethnic, or cultural identities can be expected to develop alongside, even in place of, dominating national identities" (2004: 22). Because the Web enables a certain style of freedom of association within its various communities, this can have the effect of positioning the unifying affect of shared language against the fragmenting affect of the reinforcement of local and regional identities as two contrary forces against one another. Although local

identities can exist alongside the dominant national identity, it is hard to imagine that they will ever replace the dominant state identity as it is reinforced and given continual presence in the state schooling system, state-run television and media, and state bureaucracy.

Indeed, to a degree the Web can be used as a tool analogous to broadcast media *vis à vis* the construction and reinforcement of national identities. As part of what Françoise Mengin describes as a three-pronged attempt to control cyberspace, the Chinese government has attempted to regulate implementing their own sites, as an example of which she provides the China Wide Web, launched in 1996 by the China Internet Company (Mengin, 2005: 54). According to Mengin, the Chinese state has also developed five central-government managed news websites to inform citizens of the state's endeavours in fighting corruption and the progress of national projects, and for instrumentalising the Web for nationalist purpose as witnessed during the 1999 US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (2004: 54). Considering that the search for news is the most popular activity for Chinese Web users, it follows that this is an excellent way to help reinforce the official interpretation of reality and reinforce the national identity.

A virtual community, then, can play an important role in the construction of an individual's self-identity. It has been argued that the Web can also play a role in quality of life. Ramon Oldenburg's theory of the 'Third Place' or 'Great Good Place' is a way of explaining how social spaces outside the home or workplace are necessary to create a sense of wholeness and distinctiveness (Oldenburg, 1982: 267). Although there is not enough space here to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Oldenburg's theory, we should note that although it was formulated to explain the demise of community in modern industrialised nations such as the USA, it is becoming an ever more relevant concept to use in reference in China in the light of the increasing capitalisation of the nation and the increasing wealth of the major metropolitan areas. In sum, as opposed to the home or workplace where one's sense of individuality is relegated to the role that one plays the Third Place has an atmosphere of pure sociability that allows one to participate as an individual unencumbered by the parameters and expectations associated with those roles (Oldenburg, 1982: 271-73). I believe that the Third Place offers a useful model of discussing Chinese virtual communities, be they text-based discussion fora or graphically charged online environments such as *HiPiHi*, and the role that they play in facilitating new modes of social relating.

Moreover, the concept can also help to explain what it is about these communities that have made them so popular in present-day China. For instance, are residents of *HiPiHi* continually drawn back to this virtual world because it offers an opportunity that does not otherwise exist? Or perhaps more fundamentally, what proportion of residents regularly return to the world and the communities that exist within it and other worlds such as *Second Life*? Conversely, the model of the Third Place may also help enable a discussion of the affective bonds that these communities create among their participants. A specific example of where an analysis of a virtual community as a Third Place proves useful is the BBS presented by Giese as a case study in his article "Virtual Identities on the Chinese Internet." Giese describes the culture of Ju Yong's Inn, a virtual community for fans of Kung Fu novels, as part of his analysis of the creation of and experimentation with online identities, but by interpreting his work in terms of the

theory of Third Places one can arrive at a different perception of the function of this community (2003: 200). Giese pays particular attention to a member of this community known only as 'Little Shark.' Little Shark is described as being basically respectful toward his virtual elders, but is constantly provoking them into a playful battle of wits to gain upward mobility within the social hierarchy of the community such as changing the name of the senior 'class' of knights (侠) from the novels into homonymous shrimps (虾), both pronounced *xia* (Giese, 2003: 201). By using this sort of slang, regular visitors to Ju Yong's Inn become part of the common history and culture of the group leading to a sense. Giese also points out that the discussions tend to be narrow and related to topics relevant to the offline world at the time (2003: 205). This indicates that although the community has been created ostensibly for the discussion of Kung Fu novels, in fact it has drawn together like-minded individuals who return to the same place to take part in discussions not necessarily linked to this topic. Therefore the attraction of the group must lie in the environment created by that group. Oldenburg's concept of the Third Place is useful in examining the appeal of this cyber environment because it provides an examination of the roles that purely social spaces play in people's lives. Therefore, it can serve as a model for to help explain the appeal of social groups that appear in cyberspace. This can then be used to comment on the changing Chinese social conditions that have led to the creation of these social spaces online.

### **The Third Place in Cyberspace**

The suitability of the 'Third Place' as a theoretical model to investigate online communities has been debated for some time. Lori Kendall invokes the metaphor of the pub and the flow of conversation between its visitors to explain the conversations and relationships that she observed develop in the multi-user domain (MUD) BlueSky. These conversations include personal stories (some of which appear as 'message of the day' which is displayed to all users), exchanges of information of political debates, and discussion of news of the day, all of which contribute to the creation of a group history, lore and interpersonal connections (Kendall, 2002: 142-43). In essence Kendall is describing the creation of a collective memory. Therefore, despite any difference between Chinese and Western use of these domains, it is participation that it is most important. Additionally, Kendall reports that the participants in BlueSky regularly compare it to spaces that are considered to be 'Third Places,' such as bars and clubs (2003: 145). Sherry Turkle, in her article "Virtuality and Its Discontents" examines attempts to fill the gap left by the decline in social spaces with similar areas in cyberspace. She presents her discussion as part of a historical process that charts the changing nature of modern society and culture. In sum, her article follows the replacement of downtown social spaces with malls and cinema complexes followed by the increasing tendency to bring entertainment into the home (Turkle, 1996: 52). Turkle then relates the stories of several people who have been marginalised in real society in one way or another and who have then found a purpose and solace in a virtual environment. Although she acknowledges these benefits, she presents her misgivings as well. Not only does she argue that if people are investing themselves in unreal

environments rather than solving real problems that there is cause for concern, she also questions the authenticity of the experience of self in virtual reality (Turkle, 1996: 56-7). She explains that although she is able to type “emote feels a complicated mixture of desire and expectation,” all screens will flash “ST feels a complicated mixture of desire and expectation” but that these words cannot effectively express or simulate the emotion that one may be experiencing at the time (Turkle, 1996: 57). A similar criticism may be made of graphically-charged environments, wherein the actions and expression of one’s avatar are limited. How can the programmers who have created these environments capture every nuance of the physical movements that express frustration, melancholy, or varying degrees of joy? Again, in the construction of these communities, I argue that the minutiae of detail are of lesser importance than the act of participation itself. Turkle resolves the problem of authenticity and of scaling the unreal/real divide by integrating online lives with offline lives. Rather than replacing a “real” life with a “virtual” one, that virtual personae be treated as resources for self-reflection and self-transformation and that the communities that are built within virtual reality used as an anthropological mirror of society allowing us to see what is arbitrary and what can be changed (Turkle, 1996: 57). This meaningless of authenticity is a point that will be returned to shortly. Both Castells and Jody Berland cite empirical studies that ironically show that despite most home-based non-work use of the Internet being dedicated to maintaining personal networks, personal depression increased, while communication with family members, and the size of a person’s social circle decreased (Berland, 2000: 240; Castells, 2000: 387). Admittedly, if one were to treat participation in virtual communities as analogous to spending time in a Third Place, then one’s time spent communicating with family members will decrease as the Third Place is a place apart and away from the home. Moreover, it is not indicated whether individuals with whom participants interacted with online were considered part of the participants’ social circle. However, that both report an increase in personal depression indicates people are living less rather than more complete lives.

Charles Soukup has critiqued the use of the Third Place as a model for discussing virtual communities in his article “Computer-mediated communication as a Virtual Third Place.” He accepts that there are elements shared by virtual communities and third places, including perception of them as a ‘break’ from everyday life, the temper of the conversation, and the ‘home away from home’ nature of the setting, all of which are reflected in the visual design and construction of these communities that try to replicate physical third places such as pubs and coffee houses (Soukup, 2006: 424-425). He critiques the model on three criteria: emphasis on localised community, social levelling, and accessibility (Soukup: 2006: 426). In his critique of accessibility, Soukup provides statistics that illustrate unequal access to the Web across the globe and therefore show how virtual communities fail this criterion. However this argument is nonsensical as claiming that an inner-city Melbourne pub is not a Third Place because it is inaccessible to residents of Macau. The crux of my argument is that an Internet connection is not access to a virtual community, but rather access to cyberspace as a space. With this access one becomes a member of the cyberspace community in as much the same way as one might move to a new town or suburb, and that access to virtual communities, which can be considered to be the Third Places of this particular community, is enabled through hyperlinks and search engines which are the doorways and bicycle maps of this particular community. Soukup criticises the popular misconception that computer

mediated communications are anonymous and equalising when in fact users bring their offline experiences and expectations related to gender, class, and ethnicity online (Soukup, 2006: 429). He is quite correct to point this out, but again this does not devalue the validity of the Third Place model because one doesn't leave these issues and experiences on the magazine rack of a café when popping in for a coffee and a chat. Finally, Soukup criticises the geographic discrepancies between virtual communities and traditional Third Places. He claims that Third Places are supposed to strengthen ties in a local community and that virtual communities are unable to because not every person in cyberspace would be comfortable in every virtual community (Soukup, 2006: 431). He then argues that Third Places were never intended to be multicultural, or more specifically 'multi-communal', but rather these coffee shops, beauty salons and pubs were intended to strengthen ties within a single community (Soukup, 2006: 431). This is a self-defeating argument. On the one hand, he argues that virtual communities cannot be considered Third Places because they are not multicultural, but on the other hand he argues that Third Places are not multicultural but selective, catering specifically to one or another community. Particular cafés and pubs will have varying degrees of appeal to different members of a given community just as different virtual communities will have varying degrees of appeal to those who are part of cyberspace. Soukup's error is that he relies too much on absolutes. Rather than considering the Web as a town and the various Web communities as Third Places within it, he considers the world to be a town and the Web to be a third place- an idea that is quite absurd for the reasons that have been outlined above. Nonetheless, his criticisms indicate that there are flaws with presenting Web communities as Third Places.

### **Censorship and Free Expression**

According to Joseph Raz, freedom of expression "is essentially a right to actively participate in and contribute to public culture" (1991: 304). Because the Web is a tool that allows people to make contributions to the public sphere at an unprecedented level, it would be foolish to ignore the issue of free expression and censorship when investigating the Chinese Web. Censorship needs to be thought of beyond of its political application as a tool to suppress dissident thought, publication, and action. Some degree of censorship is also necessary to ensure ethical conduct on the Internet and to minimise social conflict.

Censorship can be both direct and indirect. Direct censorship refers to the government's direct involvement in determining what content is or is not available. Françoise Mengin distinguishes between preventative and punitive (or "repressive") direct censorship measures. Preventative measures include filtering out forbidden or sensitive content through the use of firewalls.<sup>1</sup> Although impressive, this system is far from all-

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<sup>1</sup> As the purpose of this article is a discursive exploration of theory applied to discussions of the Chinese Web, I will not provide a detailed exploration of the filtering mechanisms applied by the PRC government, save to say that a number of means are employed to ensure minimise the proliferation of sensitive and prohibited material. The list of prohibited terminology is purposefully vague so as to

encompassing. However, it is supplemented by other strategies such as the punitive strategy. Content providers are subject to strict regulations that require them to keep all records of all content that appears on their sites and all users who dial onto their servers for sixty days, and to hand these records to the security agencies on demand (Hughes: 2004: 72-3). A high profile case that demonstrates the tenacity of government enforcement using repressive methods is that of Huang Qi, who established the site [www.6-4tianwang.com](http://www.6-4tianwang.com) for relatives of missing persons (Wacker, 2003: 65). Despite receiving official praise for clearing up some cases of abduction, when contributions began to commemorate events that had occurred in Tiananmen Square on the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1989, the site was closed down and Huang arrested, accused of attempting ‘to subvert the government and destroy national unity’ (Wacker, 2003: 65). In the past, Internet cafés have been the venue of choice for those who wish to tread a fine line between what is acceptable speech and what is not. Earlier this century, it was quite common even for those who had a home internet connection to use a café to participate in discussions online, showing an awareness of the regulations and ways of avoiding detection (Giese, 2004: 27). However it was only a matter of time before the cafés attract the attention of the Beijing government. In 2001, a three month police sweep of more than 60,000 cafés nationwide required owners to keep a close eye on their patrons and further prompted users to temper their own activities (Kalathil and Boas 2003: 26). According to David Lyon, the reason for these actions at the user end of the scale is to constrict the dissemination and consumption of pornographic and ‘superstitious’ materials e.g. Falun Gong (Lyon 2003: 74). However, does this action not also remind one of the ‘anti-spiritual pollution’ campaign of the mid 1980s, wherein pornography was listed as a target alongside, and possibly to distract from, the targeting of seditious material?

The threat of punitive action leads to self-censorship. Michel Hockx postulates that rules for contributors published online by the poetry community Chinapoet.net are considered seriously because failure to remove outlawed material could result in the closure of the site (Hockx, 2005: 684-85).<sup>2</sup> It follows that serious users of the resource who post poetry for the purposes of constructive criticism and discuss and criticise the works of others would consider these regulations as part of their creative process to prevent the closure of the site. Thus, the CCP has prevented the proliferation of possibly sensitive material by making it an unattractive option for the poets involved.

Indirect censorship is also the force by which the Chinese government ensures the cooperation of international corporations. One need only consider the recent outcry over the willingness of Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft to comply with the Chinese government requests for the modification of their services and for information about end-users to see the effectiveness of self-censorship on a large scale. Unfortunately for them, these companies have been caught in a battle of legislation between China and the

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increase pressure on Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Internet Content Providers (ICPs) to ensure that content hosted by them is clean.

<sup>2</sup> Outlawed material includes: “writings violating the PRC constitution, the policy of reform and opening up and the four cardinal principles,” “writings attacking the PRC government, the Chinese Communist Party and its leaders,” “writings propagating violence, superstition and licentiousness,” “writings exposing state secrets” and “all other content forbidden by law” as well as a specific mention of *falun gong* material.

United States. In response to Chinese controlling measures, the United States drafted the Global Freedom Act, which is an attempt to hold American firms accountable for their practices in countries deemed by the U.S. government as “directly or indirectly responsible for a systematic pattern of substantial restrictions on Internet freedom” (Broache, 2007). As far as legislation goes, this is a rather complicated position. The opinion of the Permanent Court of International Justice is that “a state... may not exercise its power in any form in the territory of another state” (Miller, 2003: 229). Just as the US has been accused of cultural imperialism, will it now be accused of legislative imperialism?<sup>3</sup> The massive market potential that the Chinese populace offers for international corporations is the carrot to the stick of punitive action. On a smaller scale, the up and coming young men and women who populate the campuses around China have little to gain by challenging the state.

This direct and indirect dichotomy is typical of the repressive measures implemented by authoritarian and totalitarian governments. This formula was first identified by Miklós Haraszti as the “Velvet Prison” in reference to Eastern Bloc authoritarian regimes, wherein he distinguishes between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ methods of cultural control. Once the effectiveness of the state’s control grows, overt suppression is no longer needed, so the state strives to eliminate the antagonism between the censor and the artist, to allow them to ‘diligently and cheerfully create gardens of art together’ in the creation of a planned society (Haraszti, 1987: 36-39). Reforms are introduced, ‘excesses’ curbed, crimes condemned- but this is not a genuine lessening of control, it occurs to the extent that the citizens have accepted and become adept at their own assimilation and self-censorship (Haraszti, 1987: 96). Barmé illustrates this through the periods of ‘bourgeois liberalisation’ under Hu Yaobang (1985/6) and Zhao Ziyang (1988/9) and tells us that although artists experimented with new themes, they were careful to conform to new state specifications (Barmé, 1999: 9). This demonstrates the effectiveness of indirect censorship as a soft method of cultural control. I believe that a similar transition is being, or will be, made regarding the Web, but with a twist. During the 1990s, as noted by a number of the scholars already mentioned, the government was initially more lenient in its control of the Web, allowing anonymous blogging, posting on BBSs and so forth. Most scholars agree that this leniency was tolerated by the state as a means of enabling the development of the Internet in China. Since then, we have already seen this original leniency has been rolled back resulting in the prosecution of netizens and the outlawing of anonymous posting. One can interpret this as creating the necessary conditions for the increased reliance on self-censorship that we now see.

Theory used to discuss and debate Chinese cyberculture is broad. It comes from many different traditions and schools of thought in an attempt to address the many different facets of cyberculture. Indeed, although this article has been far from comprehensive we have encountered a wide range of theory from censorship and free expression to identity and community building. To conclude, the flexibility of Chinese cyberspace as

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<sup>3</sup> As an interesting aside on this point, Mike Godwin points out that John Perry Barlow has said that the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of the United States is regarded as a “local ordinance” by other states. These inverted commas are telling, for they imply that the author or his subject believe that they are or should be applicable outside the bounds of the US state. (See: Mike Godwin, *Cyber Rights: Defending Free Speech in the Digital Age* (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003), 123.)

a tool and as a space forces the scholar to consider numerous theoretical positions and makes for a fascinating object of enquiry.

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