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Social Networking: The Lesson of *Guānxi*

September 2006

The Liberating Internet 网上社区: 中国人新的胡同

Karen CHRISTENSEN and Jonathan Qiang LI

While being careful not to cross certain lines, China's fast-growing online population is experiencing the liberation of virtual community in bulletin board systems (BBSs) and other social media.

Online relationships are transforming the lives of many people in China, particularly young people, many of whom, thanks to China's one-child policy, have grown up as single children without the traditional extended family network. For these young Chinese, a personal and career path is no longer clearly laid out. There are more things to buy, more opportunities, and more uncertainty. Sociologists note that these societal changes have spurred the development of new forms of interaction online; entrepreneurs itch with desire to take advantage of this new demographic.

China's online youth are finding friendship and solace, as well as information and entertainment, in cyberspace; they are searching for others who can relate to their experiences and who may share their mindset. As is true in the West, the Internet offers an alternative to traditional sources of information—an alternative that is often viewed as more trustworthy than corporate or government sources and more relevant than received wisdom handed down with assurances that it is true because "they say" so (他们说, *Tāmēn shuō*).



A 19th-century Chinese tea shop, the traditional place for discussion of the issues of the day. Today, similar conversation and debate take place online.

Internet users in China may already outnumber those in the United States, making China the world's most connected country.

Internet is, for an increasing number, easy to access. Its interactive nature seems to fit particularly well with Chinese culture. Educational opportunities are still uneven in China, with most major universities and information centers still clustered in and around Beijing and Shanghai, but the Internet lets students anywhere make use of online databases and other world-class information sources. Online initiatives are seen as crucial to solving the East-West educational divide.

And the numbers are staggering. Internet users in China may already outnumber those in the United States, making

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Social Network Analysis and *Guānxi*

社交分析和关系:从西方社交网
分析学的角度看中国的关系学

Barry WELLMAN, with Wenhong CHEN

There is powerful leverage in thinking of *guānxi* as a social network. Here, a well-known expert on Internet communities explains how business strategists who are working to build brand loyalty in China can use *guānxi* as an analytic tool.

Social network analysis, which studies people and organizations in relation to one another, is well suited to providing insight into *guānxi*. *Guānxi* is a fundamental web of interpersonal

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What is *Guānxi*?

关系是什么? 向美国人介中国的关系。

Thomas HEBERER

Networking portals such as Friendster, Orkut, and LinkedIn seem innovative, but they actually work in much the same way as the age-old Chinese concept of *guānxi*—and they might be improved by modeling themselves even more consciously on *guānxi*.

The concept of *guānxi* is vital to doing business in China, as well as a key aspect of everyday life in a society that is rapidly

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Publisher's Note

This is the fifth issue of *Guanxi: The China Letter* and the first to ask, "What is *guānxi*?" Readers have asked how we came to name our publication *Guanxi*. You might think we went through a lengthy process, with focus groups and surveys in the United States, Europe, and China. In truth, the process was far simpler—and riskier, given the trouble even companies as large as Google have had with names.

I became intrigued by the idea of *guānxi* when editing the *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*. As the idea of a China newsletter began to take shape, *guānxi* seemed to express what we wanted to accomplish. Our first goal was to help readers do business in China, and for that *guānxi* is essential. We were also thinking about *guānxi* as an aspect of international relations: this publication is intended to bridge gaps in our mutual understanding, to strengthen positive aspects of Sino-Western connections, and to improve Westerners' knowledge of China and Chinese perspectives. We plan to create a community through this publication, our website, and special offerings like audio conferences, an online book club, and even guided trips to China. That, too, is building *guānxi*.

It has been gratifying to find that the title makes sense to China hands and that these different implications seem immediately clear to Chinese colleagues. Even using a Chinese word as the title no longer seems a barrier, as more people are eager to learn Chinese. In this issue we continue to add more Chinese characters and transliterations. I'm happy to see that Frank Yu's proverbs column begins with the Confucian line "Is it not a great joy to have friends coming from afar?" as I am about to embark for the Beijing Book Fair and to visit many colleagues in China. It is a great joy to be heading to the Middle Kingdom.

Karen Christensen is publisher and acting editor of *Guanxi*.

The Liberating Internet

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China the world's most connected country. Charles Zhang, the chairman and CEO of China's Sohu.com, reported that, according to his internal research, Chinese Internet users numbered more than 150 million and possibly up to 200 million. The United States, by contrast, had 154 million active Internet users in January 2006. Chinese Internet users spend nearly 2 billion hours online each week; people in the United States, 129 million hours. It's hard to be precise about the figures because of the cell phone factor: cell phones are ubiquitous in China, and an unknown number of Chinese cell phone users may be using their phones to access the Internet.

China is also home to "Net stars"—personalities who are famous online, such as Mu Zimei and Fu Rong Jie (Sister Fu Rong). The world's top blogger is a Chinese actress, Xu Jinglei, who is now better known for her blogging than for her acting. She shot to the top of Technorati's list of bloggers as soon as Technorati was prodded into internationalizing. Unlike in the West, Net stars in China tend to become genuine stars who enjoy fame both online and offline.

Social Media

The online interfaces that make possible this brave new world are known collectively as social media. Weblogs (blogs) are an example of a social medium in which an individual addresses and receives feedback from a large audience—from the one to the many. Bulletin board systems (BBSs), relationship management media (sites such as MySpace or Cyworld), massively multi-

player online role-playing games (MMORPGs), file-sharing systems, and wikis are examples of social media in which many people interact with many other people—from the many to the many. Cyworld is an interesting example; originating in South Korea, it currently has some 17 million users. It combines the features of MySpace, Flickr, and virtual worlds; its many users upload approximately 6.2 million photos daily. (At Flickr, by contrast, approximately 500,000 photos are uploaded daily.) Finally, and of particular interest to businesses, there are corporate feedback forums that let people give a company feedback on their experiences with the company's products—from the many to the one.

BBSs were among the earliest online community tools and are, for now at least, the most important social medium in China, with an estimated 53 million people in China making use of them. They are easy to use and allow for anonymous communication, which, in a restrictive society such as China, gives people a feeling of liberation. The Chinese enjoy the social, community-oriented (as opposed to individualistic) nature of BBSs, and in general Chinese people are not so eager to stand out. Blogs are extremely popular, too, but unlike in the United States, they tend to be personal, generally written just for friends and family.

GTER: A Popular BBS

The BBS known as GTER (<http://bbs.gter.net/bbs>) shows how BBSs are a vital center of information exchange for Chinese young people, who, like their peers in the West, find the comments of their contemporaries online more personal, immediate, and relevant than an old-fashioned viewpoint from a traditional source of authority. GTER is a community of Chinese students who have gotten their I-20 forms (U.S. university acceptances), but still must obtain their F-1 visas (student visas). The

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process of obtaining an F-1 visa is extremely stressful: the application process is long and, for Chinese students, often mystifying. Because a personal interview is involved, the results are unpredictable, and a denial usually means the end of a dream and the loss of years of effort on the part of the student and his or her family. On GTER, students get to share their experiences with one another and offer tips on how to “bear” VO’s (visa officers), including how to answer certain questions, how to present materials, and details on the different tastes of the various VO’s.

A typical post to GTER might recount—sometimes word-by-word—the interview process with the VO, and tens to hundreds of follow-up posts will help analyze the reasoning behind each question the VO posed and why the answers the student gave may or may not be right. Other typical posts are questions—perhaps asking directions to the U.S. consulate or how to buy an airline ticket to New York City from Shanghai. Almost any question receives enthusiastic follow-up posts in which people offer analysis, experiences, and tips.

On GTER, as on other BBSs, the postings are anonymous, but people seem to cherish the help they obtain and routinely come back to help answer questions. The authors of the most helpful BBS postings are honored by their fellow posters and often given honorary positions in the BBS world. Participants adhere to a sophisticated code of online etiquettes and use specific lingo. People who follow these rules tend to get more responses and are respected more. For example, people reading the postings on GTER or other BBSs are encouraged to make a response entry, even if it’s an innocuous “hi, I like your post.” This kind of behavior is considered polite and helps to build up a participant’s reputation.

Another interesting phenomenon is the race to be the very first to respond to a post. Being the first to respond demonstrates respect, and therefore it has special importance. The first-response slot is given a special name: the sofa. People routinely compete to “grab the sofa” (抢沙发, *qiǎng shā fā*), that is, to try to be the first reader to respond. BBS rules and etiquette are rather strictly enforced on GTER, so, for example, advertisements by for-profit companies are

strictly forbidden in any of the postings. Each portion of GTER has its *bān zhǔ* (版主), or forum administrators (pronounced “banju,” and meaning, literally, “page owner”), who enforce rules and remove the postings that don’t follow the rules. As at other BBSs, *bān zhǔ* at GTER are site enthusiasts who have built a reputation for being reliable and trustworthy in enforcing the rules.

The world’s top blogger is a Chinese actress, Xu Jinglei, who is now better known for her blogging than for her acting.

Mob Mentality in Cyberspace

In the United States, Internet hunting is actual hunting: a webcam shows the landscape at an actual location, and a hunter at a computer sends a message to fire, triggering a remote-controlled gun. In China, however, Internet hunting is something completely different: it is the tracking down, by the online community at large, of someone who has committed some act or engaged in some behavior that outrages the community. The best-known case involved a wronged husband, his wife, and the student with whom the wife had an affair. The husband posted a 5,000-word letter about his wife’s affair with the student, whom

of communal morality enforcement, which, they argue, is still a potent aspect of Chinese communal culture. It may, however, give government regulators another reason for implementing a registration system for all Internet users. (The closest parallel to this phenomenon in the West may be the outrage—from both ends of the political spectrum, though for different reasons—occasioned by a gay teen’s blogging about his parents’ sending him to a program designed to change his sexual orientation.)

The Chinese government and established organizations are increasingly responsive to the opinions of the vocal online community. Tsinghua University, one of China’s leading higher-education institutions, was alerted to a professor who had lied on his résumé by an Internet campaign started by Fang Zhouzi, a famous blogger who is known for identifying and publicizing the rampant academic cheating among elite Chinese university professors; the professor was fired as a result. Similarly, an Internet campaign launched by environmentalists put pressure on the film director Chen Kaige and eventually caught the attention of the central government. The environmentalists were outraged over the damage that the film crew for Chen’s *The Promise* (2005) had done to the area surrounding Bigu Lake in

Yunnan Province—a location so strikingly like Shangri-la, the mountain paradise of James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon*, that in 2002 it adopted that name. Eventually Qiu Baoxin, the vice minister of China’s Department of Development, publicly criticized the production team. Officials in the county of Shangri-la were fired, and the production team was fined.

The government already responds to Internet social media in three important ways: by regulating it, investing in it, and monitoring online activity. This monitoring is done in various ways. One is keyword analysis: posts that mention Falun Gong or Tibet, for example, might trigger investigation. In the face of government scrutiny, the online public in China protects the freedom of their online interactions by engaging in voluntary self-censorship. Perhaps for that

The layout of the GTER BBS resembles that of similar forums in the West. English added.

she had met through the popular game World of Warcraft (a game so popular in China that its characters appear in television ads). The online community identified the student and tracked him to his parents’ home, making vehement attacks online and putting him at risk of personal injury in the “real world.” Some consider this kind of behavior a form

reason, online media has not been used for political activity in China the way it has—with noteworthy results—in the United States.

The Role of Commerce

Online activity is also monitored by marketers. One of the leaders in this area is CIC Data, a China-based Internet word-of-mouth and competitive intelligence research company. Sam Flemming, CIC Data's founder in Shanghai, blogs about social media. He thinks social media has greater reach and greater impact in China than it does in the United States because it has more impact on offline life than is true in the United States. He points to the case of the two university students who became an Internet sensation by lip-synching to the songs of the Back Street Boys: Pepsi picked them up for its Pepsi Creative Challenge campaign and its MyDa-DaDa campaign, and now they are television celebrities, called the Back Dorm Boys (后舍男生, *hòu shè nán*).

Fleming reports that investment in Chinese social media is soaring: US\$10 million in the video uploading site Toodou, US\$10 million in the consumer reviews site Dianping, and US\$10 million each in the blog service providers Bokee and Blogcn. The BBS sites Qihoo and Tein both have garnered US\$20 million in investments, and the figures jump to US\$58 million for the BBS site Map.

How GTER Got Its Name

The Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) are the two most popular U.S.-administered exams in China. In the Chinese tradition of translation of foreign words, positive or negative connotations are attached to otherwise neutral words. In the case of TOEFL, a highly positive connotation is attached: 托福 (*tuōfú*). In Chinese, *tuōfú* literally means “bring fortune.” The GTER BBS was established in 2000 with the goal of helping students with these two exams, thus the origin of the G and the T in its name. GTER's name in its entirety was deliberately crafted to have a positive connotation. It is written in Chinese with 寄托 (*jìtuō*), which means, literally, “gives hope.”

Sources for all articles and recommended further reading are provided at www.guanxionline.com.

HOURS PER DAY SPENT ON THE INTERNET IN CHINA

Year	Hours
2001	1.47
2003	1.9
2005	2.73

Source: Guo Liang, *The CASS Internet Survey Report 2005: Surveying Internet Usage and Impact in Five Chinese Cities* (Beijing: Research Center for Social Development, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2005).

All these services are very good at marketing their brands, and their marketing is highly cultural. They understand what sorts of news and stories will attract the most attention among Chinese readers—patriotic cases against the Japanese, news on corruption, sex scandals, and so on—and they exploit this. A few blog articles can quickly become national talk, influence policies and popular sentiments, and cause social uproars.

Similar, but Different

In many ways, online communities and life online are much the same the world over. People search for information, support, and entertainment; they hope to find a sense of community that will enable them to be more successful and happier. But online life in China is also something new, because it is growing out of a culture with a deeply rooted tradition of what Hong Kong sociologist Chan Kwok Bun calls “social exchange based on sentiments and emotions . . . marked by a mutual belief in reciprocity”—but at a time when that culture's economy is rapidly modernizing and globalizing. It will be interesting to see if Chinese innovations in the realm of social media will come West—perhaps before long the United States will have its own “Net stars.”



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University and maintains an active Chinese-language blog that has led to many friendships.



Social Network Analysis and Guānxi

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relations permeating Chinese society that should not be facetiously dichotomized into “bad” bribery relations and “good” friendships. Instead of sniffing at *guānxi* as a corrupter of rational bureaucratic procedures or celebrating it as a liberation of human initiative, scholars use social network analysis to delve into its characteristics and contexts. *Guānxi* relationships can reduce uncertainty, lower search and other transaction costs, provide usable resources, and increase interpersonal pleasure and a sense of connectedness. *Guānxi* networks are flexible, efficient, available, and custom-tailored sources of social capital that are low in financial cost.

Members of little-box societies deal only with fellow members of the few groups to which they belong.

What Social Network Analysis Does

Social network analysis conceives of social structure as the patterned organization of network members and their relationships. Analysis starts with a set of network members (sometimes called nodes) and a set of ties that connect some or all of these nodes. Ties consist of one or more specific relationships, such as kinship, frequent contact, information flows, conflict, or emotional support. The interconnections of these ties channel resources to specific structural locations in social systems. The patterns of these relationships—the social network structure—organize systems of exchange, control, dependency, cooperation, and conflict.

Network analysts study how social networks work for individuals, for relationships, and for social systems. At the level of individuals, social network analysts study interpersonal ties between people; at a more macro level, they study interorganizational ties between companies, between government departments and agencies, and between entities at an international level in the world system.

The Case of China

In China, as in much of the world, people's perceptions of society and how people and institutions are connected is changing. In the past, China was a “little-box society.” Members of little-box societies deal only with fellow members of the few groups to which