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The Gay Space in Chinese Cyberspace: Self-Censorship, Commercialisation and Misrepresentation

Loretta Wing Wah Ho

Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the gay space in Chinese cyberspace. It has two main goals. It explores how the internet is used as a system of state control and a sphere of theoretical freedom. It also delves into how some of the Chinese gay-oriented websites are increasingly self-censored and commercialised in Chinese cyberspace.

In this paper, I argue that the growing commercialisation of the gay space in Chinese cyberspace marks a paradoxical development of the Chinese internet, where state control, a degree of freedom of expression, and self-censorship coexist.

I use cyber anthropology as a research methodology to demonstrate how online material can offer untapped textual resources concerned with the construction of emerging gender and sexual identities in Chinese cyberspace. (Manuscript received February 12, 2007; accepted for publication July 15, 2007)

Keywords: gay, cyberspace, representation, (self)-censorship, commercialisation

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Studie

Gay Space im chinesischen Cyberspace: Selbstzensur, Kommerzialisierung und Stereotype

Loretta Wing Wah Ho

Abstract

Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht am Beispiel des Gay Space im chinesischen Cyberspace, in welcher Weise das internet als System staatlicher Kontrolle und zugleich als zumindest theoretischer Freiraum genutzt wird. In diesem Zusammenhang wird auch dem Phänomen nachgegangen, dass einige der chinesischen Websites für Homosexuelle eine zunehmende Tendenz der Selbstzensur und Kommerzialisierung aufweisen. Insbesondere diese Kommerzialisierung ist kennzeichnend für die paradoxe Entwicklung des chinesischen internets im Allgemeinen, in der staatliche Kontrolle, ein bestimmtes Maß an Ausdrucksfreiheit und Selbstzensur nebeneinander existieren.

Unter Rückgriff auf Methoden der sogenannten Cyber Anthropology nutzt die Autorin internetquellen als bislang wenig exploriertes Primärmaterial im Hinblick auf die Konstruktion neuer geschlechtlicher und sexueller Identitäten im chinesischen Cyberspace. (Manuskript eingereicht am 12.02.2007; zur Veröffentlichung angenommen am 15.07.2007)

Die Autorin

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Introduction

This paper seeks to investigate the gay space in Chinese cyberspace. It has two main goals. It explores how the internet is used as a system of state control and a sphere of theoretical freedom. It also delves into how some of the Chinese gay-oriented websites are increasingly self-censored and commercialised in Chinese cyberspace. That is why, in the title of this paper, I imply that while the gay space in Chinese cyberspace is self-censored and commercialised, same-sex identity is arguably misrepresented.

My argument in this paper is two-fold. I argue that the growing commercialisation of the gay space in Chinese cyberspace marks a paradoxical development of the Chinese internet, where state control, a degree of freedom of expression, and self-censorship coexist. I seek to stretch this argument by proposing that the complexity and dynamism of Chinese cyberspace ensures misrepresentation of same-sex identity, but can also produce as much homogeneity as diversity. In doing so, I engage with the ever-changing processes of state surveillance, commercialisation and identity reinvention taking place in Chinese cyberspace. I also highlight how these processes are increasingly localised and tied up with contradictions of homogeneity and diversity, freedom and control. Ultimately, these contradictions serve to demonstrate the ways in which gay netizens in China discover themselves and embrace the international same-sex communities through an imagined and real sphere in Chinese cyberspace. Given this argumentation, I propose the following structure for this paper.

Structure of this Paper

In this paper, I set out to examine the representation of some of the gay-oriented websites that are mainly created for, and visited by, Chinese-speaking same-sex attracted individuals in mainland China. The first part of this paper clarifies a few key terms and explains why cyber anthropology is adopted as a research methodology to examine the gay space in Chinese cyberspace. The paper then presents the collective dynamics of the gay space in cyberspace by focusing on the complex interchange between the local and the global in an online setting. In the second part, the paper analyses the local nature of the gay space in Chinese cyberspace. I demonstrate that this Chinese gay space is increasingly (self-)censored and allows for a theoretical expression of individual identities. I link this exploration to study the emergence of Comrade Literature (*tongzhi wenxue*)

and a commercial culture in the Chinese gay space. This study is intended to illuminate how this emergence comes to affect the authorial autonomy of Chinese gay-oriented websites and how it facilitates misrepresentation of same-sex identity. In closing, I propose to rethink some of the political issues in the gay space of Chinese cyberspace. In particular, I seek to problematise how the impact of increasing online self-censorship and commercialism is reinforcing misrepresentation of gay-oriented websites, along with same-sex identity.

Terminology

In this section, I am interested in studying three terms central to the present analysis. They are "cyberspace", "gay" and "representation". With regard to the term "cyberspace", I draw from William Gibson who writes that cyberspace is:

> [A] consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts [...]. A graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system. (Cavallaro 2000:viv)

Gibson's conception of cyberspace is useful for this paper as it reminds me of how imagination and fantasy is deeply embedded in many of our everyday experiences. Gibson's conception also helps me recognise how the power of imagination continuously transforms individual identities or desires into collective representations. Crucially, this imaginary power is, as Dani Cavallaro (2000:x) observes, "a product of contingent trends and is accordingly open to ongoing redefinition".

Drawing from Gibson and Cavallaro and others, I develop the term "cyber-space" to conceptualise an imagined space where interaction and representation take place. I also interpret "cyberspace" as a form of reality that has implications for offline social experiences. In stating this, I recognise a close link between online and offline experiences to the extent that certain online features (such as email and chat room) can be used to alter the economies of social organisation in significant ways. Besides, I have to stress that the use of "cyberspace" as both an imagined and real space signifys my exploratory attempt to make sense of the relationship between identity and electronic technology. My attempt is thus ultimately to offer new perspectives on the construction of online Chinese same-sex identity and contribute to cyber anthropology on this subject matter.

Furthermore, I offer to elaborate on the term "gay". Recent studies have shown that an increasing number of Chinese people in urban China have come

to embrace a gay subject-position as a means of connecting to the international same-sex communities, both online and offline (Lim 2006; Cristini 2005; Chou 2000; Rofel 1999). Significantly, this gay subject position represents how global flows (such as the circulation of dominant Western gay and lesbian cultural products) are actively taking place in the gay space in Chinese cyberspace. Indeed, it can be seen on many of the Chinese gay-oriented websites, and also through my fieldwork in Beijing, that many Chinese netizens do call themselves gay or lesbian. I argue that the term "gay" has newly emerged as a social category especially in urban China and in Chinese cyberspace. And yet, it is a diverse and divided social category. To an extent, "gay" is appropriated in the Chinese context not to represent mainstream ideas or practices of Western gayness, but to denote a class status and a marker of modernity. That is to say, the Chinese who call themselves gay in China do have recognisable characteristics of a reasonably good social background. Most fundamentally, this manner of gay identification has profound implications for an individual's educational level (*jiaoyu chengdu*), financial status (*jingji zhuangkuang*), relationship (*guanxi*) networks, and survival skills (*shengcun nengli*) in the Chinese scheme of things.

On the other hand, it is worth pointing out that many Chinese individuals also use *tongxinglian*, *tongxing'ai*, *tongzhi*, *lala* and *les* for same-sex identification, both online and offline. In particular, the categories *tongxinglian*, *tongxing'ai* and *tongzhi* are earlier "local" representations of Chinese same-sex identity. Nowadays, these categories continue to be used, usually by those who deliberately detach themselves from or are indifferent to local or global same-sex networks. Besides, my fieldwork informs me that *lala* and *les* are used for self-identification by some same-sex attracted Chinese women in urban China.

Finally, it is essential to explain what I mean by "representation" in this paper. On the one hand, I use "representation" with an acute awareness that a few problems are particularly relevant to the representation of the Other in cyber anthropology. The first problem is that cyber anthropology, as well as many other studies, all confront the dilemma of seeking to represent the Other in a critical and ethical manner; and yet, the act of representing in itself is an act of power over the Other. Another problem, which arises from the anthropological privilege, is linked with the ways in which the anthropological gaze may misrepresent online identities, something which is a highly problematic category. For one thing, online identities are never clearly defined and have great potential to cross local, national and international boundaries. Furthermore, a "new" problem

of online representation emerges with what is now called deterritorialisation. I propose that deterritorialisation has become one of the central forces in cyber anthropology that affects processes and products of representation. In a way, cultural meanings are all the more constructed through interaction, which is made possible through the collapsing and overlapping of local, national and transnational boundaries especially by electronic media.

On the other hand, I use "representation" to emphasise how Chinese gayness in the online and offline communities may be represented as non-confronting. As Chou Wah-shan (2000:8) argues, this non-confronting self-representation of Chinese gayness attaches "primacy to the familial-kinship system over individual rights, and harmonious social relationships over confrontational politics". By citing Chou, I wish to point out that same-sex attracted Chinese tend to reconcile their sexual identity with the cultural and familial structure of the community where social harmony is actively promoted. The use of this non-confronting approach also means that Chinese gay-oriented webmasters have to scrutinise their content in order not to offend the censor. By the same token, Chinese gay netizens must abide by the censorship laws in China where (self)-censorship is not always made explicit, but is often internalised by people through indoctrination or "thought work" (*sixiang gongzuo*).

At the same time, this non-confrontational approach is accompanied by passive resistance and is a by-product of (self)-censorship in Chinese cyberspace. An example of passive resistance is the frequent use of coded language in Chinese gay-oriented chat rooms to escape censorship. As Remy Cristini (2005:35) suggests, the emergence of this coded language is a reaction to government prohibition against the use of sexually explicit language in Chinese chat rooms. Along similar lines, Karsten Giese's (2004) research reports that netizens in China constantly use their ingenuity to find new ways of escaping online surveillance. As far as I can see, one common way to escape online surveillance in China is to use a coded language, through a play of numbers, symbols, dialects, foreign terms, sounds, and so forth. This play of language in Chinese cyberspace has created what Hsu Fu-chang (2002:3-4) calls "a net speak subculture", subverting traditional language use.

In a nutshell, the representation of same-sex identity on Chinese gay-oriented websites is largely contingent upon, among other factors, state surveillance in cyberspace. Despite surveillance, Chinese gay netizens make use of the online environment to form imagined communities as a symbolic act of representing

their gayness. However, these communities merely represent a form of self-help group rather than institutional organisations. The kind of confrontation with powerful institutions that represents Western gay and lesbian politics does not come into their equation. The Pride Parade is a prime example pushing gay and lesbian visibility, moving beyond the non-confronting practice of staying "in the closet".

As I have signalled above, "cyberspace", "gay" and "representation" are compelling concepts that require problematisation. This problematisation, in turn, is significantly informed by the following research methodology.

Methodology

I use "cyber anthropology" as a research methodology in this paper. My rationale for using it is two-fold. Primarily, I believe that online material can offer untapped textual resources concerned with the construction of emerging gender and sexual identities. Recent research has reported, albeit quite generally, that "for young GLBT [gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual/transgendered] people the internet is the most important source of information pertaining to GLBT issues" (Jardin 2006:9). Besides, I use "cyber anthropology" as a research practice to reflect on the relationship between electronic technology and identity. For this purpose, I am particularly interested in exploring how self-consciously modern Chinese same-sex identity is transformed and articulated around the internet.

Importantly, this methodology of cyber anthropology involves the practices of self-reflexivity and online participant observation. Perhaps equally important, the methodology also requires the application of ethical principles to study human subjects on targeted websites. I am acutely aware that there are still unresolved ethical issues concerning what rights, and under what circumstances, researchers can use online postings. In view of this, I obtained ethics approval from the academic institute that I work with before appropriating data from websites.

This methodology also involves positioning myself as an observer and a netizen within the gay space of Chinese cyberspace, while seeking to carry out a textual analysis of narratives on websites. Through this positioning, I hope to gain a sense of how social experiences of gay netizens in China are expressed in their own terms, despite the fact that these terms are necessarily mediated by the complex process of translation. This positioning is strategic. It allows me to randomly select cultural material from targeted websites, which can be publicly accessed for data collection and interpretation, and are regularly visited by gay

netizens in China. This selected material is meant to represent popular features that characterise a newly emerging social space for the online Chinese same-sex community. It is a space which has been rapidly extending its territory especially since China's opening up (*kaifang*) to global power relations. Generally speaking, the emergence of a gay space in cyberspace has provoked criticism and resistance, both in public and academic discussion.

The Gay Space in Cyberspace

Recent studies have argued that community building of same-sex attracted people has been transformed by and around electronic media (Alexander 2002; Heinz et al. 2002; Castells 2001). As shown in Van Noort's (cited in Heinz et al. 2002:108) study, the same-sex communities have moved from physical locations to cyberspace, which it is thought to be "incredibly welcoming, supportive, vibrant, and amusing", offering them a space to imagine a shared community and look for friendships and relationships. Jennifer Egan (cited in Alexander 2002:78) notes that an increasing number of young, same-sex attracted people are making use of cyberspace to "make contact with others, to find role models for their fledgling lives as gay people, and even to establish romantic and sexual relationships". Egan (ibid.) argues that same-sex attracted people now tend to come out at a younger age, "perhaps due to the availability of information and interactivity, offered by the internet". Dennis Altman (2001:94) writes that the internet in Japan "has become a central aid to homosexual cruising", facilitating sexual interaction among gay men and a building of the same-sex community. John Gilgun (cited in Alexander 2002:78), an award-winning gay author, believes and advocates that the internet has considerably transformed the life of many gay men and lesbians.

I discuss this line of argument to underline a point. That is, cyberspace may be conveniently constructed as a site for producing a shared community or even a common consciousness, existing across time and space. Cyberspace may also be easily imagined as a "global" space that helps negotiate the process of coming out. I have reservations about this line of thought. It seems to overstate the function of cyberspace in transforming lives and lifestyles on a "universal" scale, despite its unpremeditated intention. By overstating its function, it creates the image that "universal" thoughts and values can be automatically promoted within cyberspace. This overstatement is not entirely useful for making sense of the complex and multiple processes of cross-cultural appropriation taking

place in cyberspace. Following Chris Berry and Fran Martin, I find it fruitful to concentrate on how these processes articulate:

> the specific, material process through which cultural products and practices travel the globe and are altered and assimilated "elsewhere" in specific local contexts, often through indigenization with less recognizably "global" forms. (Berry & Martin 2003:89)

In other words, it is important to consider how globalising processes transform local identities, and how such processes are absorbed and localised within specific spatial and material conditions.

My consideration is based on readings about cultural globalisation by Chris Berry and Fran Martin (2003), Lisa Rofel (1999) and Arjun Appadurai (1996). These researchers are united in arguing for "the possibility of a heterogenizing view of cultural globalisation" (Berry & Martin 2003:88). Their position is that cultural globalisation survives on cross-cultural differences in power and knowledge. In particular, Appadurai has convinced me that the globalising or homogenising approach to cultural identities and categories is inadequate in capturing the politics of localising and globalising processes that characterise plurality, diversity, difference and imbalance. Appadurai's comment is thus a helpful reminder:

> [. . .] globalization is itself a deeply historical, uneven, and even localizing process. Globalization does not necessarily or even frequently imply homogenization or Americanization, and to the extent that different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently, there is still ample room for the deep study of specific geographies, histories, and languages. (Appadurai 1996:17)

I agree in the main with this line of argument. The interactions between the local and the global are deeply inequitable, diverse or even increasingly localised. I underline this line of argument, to use the words of Lisa Rofel (1999:457), to "open inquiry into contingent processes and performative evocations that do not presume equivalence but ask after confrontations charged with claims of power". This position, as I see it, refuses to posit "local" and "global" as two totally opposing categories. It advances the notion that we should interrogate how each constructs and problematises the other.

In what is to follow, I intend to build on this line of argument. I propose a shift from an emphasis on cultural homogenisation to a position that considers how homogenisation and heterogenisation can both construct a gay space in

cyberspace. I aim to engage in a broad data sample to focus on two internet realms: the intensifying localisation and commercialisation of gay-oriented websites in Chinese cyberspace. The two realms serve to reflect my main concern with this chapter. That is, the problematic space of cyberspace, which is subject to the complex interplay of the local and the global, can create as much homogeneity as diversity. I will explain this point in the next section.

The Gay Space in Chinese Cyberspace

Ongoing studies have indicated that the emergence of a gay space in Chinese cyberspace has become a reality since the 1990s (Cristini 2005; Jiang 2005; Tong 2004; Zhu 2004; Chou 2000). For example, Chou Wah-shan's (2000) research reports that the internet in China is becoming an important tool for *tongzhi* to engage in a constructive dialogue and build an unprecedented space for the diasporic Chinese same-sex communities around the globe. Chou writes:

> the gradual popularization of the internet in China has helped to generate a small but a rapidly growing *tongzhi* community which will prove to be a pioneering force in building indigenous *tongzhi* discourses in China. (Chou 2000:134)

Consider what this self-identified gay man said in an interview: "It would never have been possible for me to find our kind of people (*women zhezhongren*) if there were no internet" (2004, pers.comm., 25 May). During my interviews with webmasters of these gay-oriented websites gaybyte.com, gaychinese.cn and Boy21C (2007), they emphasised that the internet has brought together many *tongzhi* in China, where there is still little genuine acceptance of same-sex relationship as a healthy sexual life (2004, pers.comm., 22 May). In my conversations with those who called themselves gay or lesbian, they all believed that the internet was a significantly new channel where they could look for friends (*zhao pengyou*) and support (*zhichi*) (2004, pers.comm., March to May). Zhu Chuanyan (2004, pers.comm., 25 March), who compiled the *internet's Effect on Homosexual's Identity*, told me that many gay netizens in China are making use of the online environment to look for a sense of community, not only in China, but also across the diasporic Chinese same-sex communities. Jiang Hui (2005:1), a webmaster of gaychinese.cn, remarks that the internet has become "an inseparable part of the gay agenda and community building" for same-sex groups in China.

Nevertheless, the gay space in Chinese cyberspace, and elsewhere, can be

viewed as a sphere for the (re)production of both cultural homogenisation and heterogenisation. On the one hand, there is a degree of cultural homogenisation in the gay space of Chinese cyberspace. Having a glance at certain well-established Chinese gay websites (for example; gaychinese.cn), it is common to see foreign news coverage revolve around such similar topics as the Pride Parade, gay rights, same-sex marriage, the decriminalisation of homosexuality or the coming out process (ICCGL 2007a). Besides, gay-oriented websites in China tend to use homogenous ideas or symbols as gay identity markers. Quite prominently, diasporic or popular Western gay and lesbian icons are commonly used as symbols for group identification. These websites also mark themselves as gay by revolving around typical gay-oriented subjects; many of them are arguably based on foreign/Western sources. This cultural homogenisation leads me to question how the globalisation of electronic media helps (re)produce certain universal myths, stereotypes and misrepresentations about the "Western" gay scene as a gay haven. One major criticism of this homogenisation is that the universally homogenising view of cultural globalisation ensures an elimination of cultural difference and a reduction of (same-sex) identities around the globe (Berry, Martin & Yue 2003; Rofel 2001; Appadurai 1996).

On the other hand, there is also cultural heterogenisation in the gay space of Chinese cyberspace. Cyberspace represents a field that enables gay netizens in China to imagine alliances with the diverse same-sex identities and communities around local, national and international borders. For example, in my conversations with people in bars that marked "gay" in Beijing, these people often demonstrated a sense of affinity for the global and diasporic Chinese same-sex communities (2004, pers.comm., March to May). Some of them mentioned having (sexual) relationships and friendships with *laowai* (usually referring to Westerners) or *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese). A few of them mentioned that they had visited gay bars while they were on a trip overseas. A self-identified lesbian said that she paid to have sex with a female sex worker in Amsterdam. A self-identified *money boy* (a rent boy) told me in an interview that he had sex with an overweight *laowai* without a condom for 350.00 CNY.

Notably, all this affinity is subject to displacement. In a way, gay netizens in China make use of cyberspace to appropriate notions of identity or activism from foreign sources. And yet, this appropriation is strategic, not a simple reproduction of other identities or cultures. On this point, I draw from a recent study that focuses on how online interactions between local and global identities

give rise to a melange of cultural categories, rather than a simple mimicry of patterns (Berry & Martin 2003:89). This study follows closely the post-colonial project to decentre the West by rejecting Western-centric claims to knowledge and power. Significantly, this study does not mean to privilege the local over the global. Rather, as Ann Cvetkovich and Douglas Kellner point out, such a study urges us to

> think through the relationship between the global and the local by observing how global forces influence and even structure ever more local situations and ever more strikingly. (Berry, Martin & Yue 2003:5)

Locality of Gay-oriented Websites in China

Jiang Hui (2006, pers.comm., 11 May), a webmaster of gaychinese.cn, told me on the phone that the earliest gay-oriented websites in China emerged around 1998. These websites were: gztz.org, china.reddust.net and boysky.com. According to the figures by Tong Ge (2004:190), up to the end of May 2004, there were approximately 360 *tongzhi* websites operating in China.

A quick survey of some of the Chinese gay-oriented websites shows that they are generally quite similar in layout and content. Generally, Chinese gay-oriented websites have an extremely compact layout. It is a layout that is loaded with links to, for instance; comrade literature (*tongzhi wenxue*); chat rooms (*liaotianshi*); the Bulletin Board System (*luntan*); an question-and-answer corner for *tongzhi* (*tongzhi wenda*); making friends (*jiaoyou*); legal aids (*falü yuanzhu*); and news (*xinwen*). In particular, many of these links cover local and international news and information, with a focus on same-sex issues. Typically, there are also numerous blinking texts, colourful images and advertisements that immediately capture the eye.

There are distinctive features that characterise gay-oriented websites in China. I highlight three of them. Firstly, most of the gay and lesbian websites in China are short-lived. This short duration is partly attributable to the ambiguity in the legislation of internet regulations. Chinese authorities tend to continually revise internet regulations. Apart from having to go through "the world's largest and oldest bureaucracy" – as Johan Lagerkvist (2005:190) comments on China's implementation of electronic technology – website operators in China also have to re-register upon the announcement of revised internet regulations. Michelle W. Lau's (2005) report indicates that government authorities in China issue extensive regulations to govern internet usage. Lau writes:

> these [internet] regulations often overlap, are regularly updated, and are created and carried out by multiple government agencies, the legal infrastructure regarding internet usage in China is extraordinarily complex. (Lau 2005:3)

In sum, according to the gay-oriented webmasters I interviewed, the opening and running of Chinese gay-oriented websites could be affected by four main factors: 1) an ambiguous online legal status, 2) a lack of financial resources, 3) online pornography, and 4) computer hacking by other Chinese gay and lesbian websites (2004, pers.comm., March to May). As Jiang Hui (2006, pers.comm., November to May), a webmaster of gaychinese.cn, informed me, computer hacking was attributable to two main reasons. They are competition for representation within the same region and personal conflicts among gay-oriented website operators. To complicate matters, government bodies sometimes handle applications of certain gay and lesbian websites with deliberate delay or even avoidance (Tong 2004:201).

Secondly, there is an imbalance between gay and lesbian websites in China. Of the 300-400 websites, less than twenty serve the lesbian community, although some gay and lesbian websites have started to merge with the aim of attracting a larger audience. One striking difference between gay and lesbian websites in China is that gay websites demonstrate more technical expertise than their lesbian counterparts, with more instant text messaging devices such as ICQ/QQ, MSN, IRC and audio-visual chat rooms. The other difference lies in the fact that gay websites are generally more commercialised and sexualised. They constantly call for advertisements, memberships, sponsorships and donations, while exhibiting sexually suggestive images. These differences are largely due to the fact that gay websites have established themselves at an earlier stage, allowing them to accumulate more technological expertise and internet experience.

Thirdly, most of the gay and lesbian websites in China are set up as blogs (*boke*). They are run by individuals, a small group, or a few volunteers in accordance with their wishes. As Tong Ge (2004:197) comments, content (such as texts, images, videos or links) of many "*tongzhi* websites" is generated on the basis of the founders' goals and interests. This fact gives rise to a lack of objective standards in providing services to the same-sex community in China. For example, some gay webmasters I interviewed provided the following information (2004, pers.comm., March to May). 1) A handful of websites carry out gay activism by seeking cooperation with international groups in order to protect gay rights and

demand legislation of sexual equality. 2) Some websites single out education as a vital tool in bridging the gap between the same-sex community and the wider community via electronic means. 3) Other websites provide services to same-sex attracted people with the purpose of looking after their general wellbeing. These services include, for example, social activities, seminars, sexual health workshops, *tongzhi* hotline or counselling, organised for members of the community by gay or gay-friendly volunteers.

Localised Gay Spaces

Gay-oriented websites in Chinese cyberspace are arguably increasingly localised. It should be stressed that the websites studied are Chinese-language-based. The language of online discussions is predominantly Chinese, but simple English and "Chinglish" phrases (for example: P, T[1], les, lala, gay or lesbian) are occasionally used especially for self-identification (Tong 2004:191). These particular ways of speaking are embroiled with local meanings and interpretations that reveal concerns and prejudices specific to the Chinese (same-sex) community. Parallel research into Japan's internet development shows that "there are many contexts in which internet use in Japan is, if not unique, then at least influenced by factors strongly pronounced in that society" (Gottlieb & McLelland 2003:2). I incline to the view that gay-oriented websites in China cannot be described as international, as most of the content is in Chinese and is deeply localised. It is predominantly concerned with the wellbeing of the Chinese (same-sex) community. Interestingly, one striking feature of these websites is that gay netizens in China are constantly borrowing language and images from global flows of information and people, while adapting themselves locally. This is a gesture of gay netizens in China to imagine as part of the international same-sex community through the "global" reach of the internet (at least among wired areas in urban China). In this light, I find Crystal's comment a useful reminder:

> Most internet interactions are not global in character; we are not talking to millions when we construct our Web pages, send an e-mail, join a chat group, or enter a virtual world. (Gottlieb & McLelland 2003:8)

Gay-oriented websites in China are also locally particular in that they localise global identities and ideas for their own use. In other words, they embed

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[1] "P" refers to a "pure" girl, a feminine lesbian. "T" refers to a tomboy lesbian.

the global in a local context. They provide links to services, information and entertainment exclusively for the local same-sex communities. For instance, they feature internet radio broadcast on sina.com (2007), a betting corner on boysky.com (2007), an information centre on ICCGL (2007a) or advertising for male massage parlours on Notearsky Studio (2007a). Some websites have links to regional same-sex attracted netizens such as Ligumaloes (2007), Boy21C (2007), and Notearsky Studio (2007a). Furthermore, chat rooms (*liaotianshi*) and the Bulletin Board System (BBS or *luntan*) on Chinese gay-oriented websites are represented and seen by gay netizens as local spaces. These two spaces are extremely popular on the internet in China, representing a distinct set of online experiences of Chinese (gay) netizens. These spaces facilitate a discussion of issues in an interactive environment. They also emerge as a social space of convergence, where (gay) netizens of similar views and experiences come together for mutual support. To an extent, they operate as an imagined community network for (gay) netizens to advertise for a relationship and post messages or photographs, all of which can be viewed by members of the community, as well as visitors. As an example, some content of the BBS on the Shanghai Lesbians website is shown below:

I am a woman who is attracted to the same-sex. Having chosen to be attracted to the same-sex, I am almost destined to be an abnormal person in the eyes of society. Perhaps, I have to live in darkness for the rest of my life and to have my deepest desire hidden at the bottom of my heart until death. Then, I will disappear from this world without even making a sound. Whether we are attracted to the same sex or the opposite sex, our love is all the same. What is the difference between same-sex and opposite-sex attraction? Whether you accept it or not, I can tell you that I only wish to look for my own happiness and felicity. Those girls, who are from Fujian and Anhui, please contact me on ICQ 195xxx290. Of course, no matter where you come from, you are also welcome to contact me.

I only wish to look for a T [a tomboy lesbian] who really loves me. For a long time, I thought a man could love me very much. But he ended up leaving me. Perhaps, God should not have created men. After having been tormented by men, I now do not trust them any more. I hate them. I only want to be myself. I do not want to change for anybody. I am a P (a feminine lesbian). I really hope that I can find a T who will always

be good to me, and we can share a life together, forever. I look forward to hearing from you. My mobile phone is 057xxxx9761. (Myrice.com 2006)

The above BBS postings are examples of localisation of cyberspace, a space which is increasingly localised by people around the globe to suit their own needs. In this case, these BBS postings show that (gay) netizens in China make use of cyberspace, a global context, to express personal concerns that can reflect certain socio-cultural specificities. We see two women pouring out their personal experience online. This disclosure of personal experience online is based on the presumed anonymity and safety of the internet. In fact, it is quite common to see many Chinese gay netizens speak of their personal experience online with great ardour. For Kenneth Plummer (1995:83), this enthusiasm for telling one's experience makes sense, precisely because an important understanding of one's same-sex identity usually finds expression in coming out stories and in revelations of the "truth". It is common, too, to see some gay netizens tell stories about their sex life. For instance, there is a great deal of talk about autoeroticism (*ziti huanyu*) and passionate intercourse (*jiqing zhijiao*) on lalabar.com (2007) and same-sex intercourse (*tongzhi xing'ai*) on Notearsky Studio (2007b).

Furthermore, other gay netizens take delight in sharing stories about one-night stands (*yiyeqing*), which are now becoming one of the most popular subjects of discussion in Chinese cyberspace (Mao 2005). For instance, this website 21cn.com (2007) provides people with information on locating others who are interested in one-night stands. There is insufficient research into the phenomenon of one-night stands in contemporary China. Yet, it can be argued that the emergence of one-night stands coincides with China's opening up, coupled with the problematic discourse of sexual opening (*xingkaifang*). *Tianliang Yihou Shuofenshou* (Say Goodbye at Daybreak) is a popular Chinese book which claims to document the stories of one-night stands about 19 cosmopolitan women in China.

Browsing through some of the postings on this Shanghai Lesbians BBS myrice.com (2006); it is also evident that Chinese gay netizens focus on personal, rather than community matters. In particular, the need for forming friendships or relationships is a primary concern. There are two possible answers to this concern. One obvious answer is that many same-sex attracted people in China, and elsewhere, are badly in need of mutual support as a result of isolation and oppression of heteronormativity. The other answer is that mainland Chinese

society has little room for the expression of alternative sexual identities and individual freedom. The following extracts highlight certain personal concerns that are at times expressed in the Shanghai Lesbians BBS.

I am a lesbian. I only know that I am attracted to the same-sex. I now understand that I am a lesbian. I would like to look for a P in Shanghai. I am a T.

I am so lonely. Is there any single PP in Shanghai? Can we make friends? If you become my girl friend, I will be very good to you. Send a text message to 1381xxx3105 QQ 195xxx66.

Are you a lesbian and interested in SM? My QQ is 151xxx274.

Hi, to all handsome Ts, I have what you need for breasts binding. Interested parties, please contact me on 180xxx66.

I have recently graduated from university. I have reached 26 years old and have a boy friend. My boy friend and I have been going out for two years, and we adore each other. Because of family pressure, I would like to look for a lesbian to get married so that we can live together. I am working for a government organisation and have entitlements as a government functionary. Interested parties may contact me on QQ 183xxx456 or on 280xxx592. (Myrice.com 2006)

On many gay and lesbian websites in China, addressing personal matters takes up a huge portion of the BBS and chat rooms. As Mark McLelland (2005:10) states, the internet enables "the widespread dissemination of first-person narrative about sexual minorities [...]". The above examples serve to illustrate that the internet facilitates a dialogue of individual agency. To a degree, the internet allows marginalised people in China to discuss sensitive and personal matters, for example; same-sex relationship, emotional needs, alternative sexuality, marriage, and breasts binding. That being said, the internet in China is also typically used not only by marginalised groups, but also by "non-conformists", to challenge norms and authorities. Zhou Yongming's (2005) study of *minjian* (unofficial) political writers in Chinese cyberspace is a shining example revealing that some of these *minjian* writers are posing challenges to the Chinese state. One of Zhou's arguments is that the ability of this *minjian* online group to express

itself politically is generally underestimated and is therefore worth more critical attention.

Additionally, the specific online environment in China, characterised by increasing self-censorship and commercialism, appears to promote "tabloidisation". This tabloidisation, according to Colin Sparks, can be interpreted

> as a shift from hard news (news about politics, economics, and society) to soft news (news about diversions such as sports, scandal, and celebrities) and a shift from concentrating on public life to concentrating on private life. (McCormick & Liu 2003:152)

There is indeed an explosion of storytelling in contemporary Chinese society. To an extent, Chinese (gay) citizens and netizens appear to be interested in telling gossip and stories about personal matters. Often, these personal matters revolve around relationship affairs, sex life and family dramas, all of these are often represented with an emotional or sensational tone of voice. Given the possibilities of personal and political dialogues that cyberspace offers, *tongzhi wenxue* (Comrade Literature) has emerged. This emergence is the focus of the next section.

Comrade Literature

Remy Cristini's (2005) research reports that a new literary genre, generally known as *tongzhi wenxue* (Comrade Literature), has come into existence in Chinese cyberspace. Cristini's research signifies a pioneering research effort; it is richly contextualised and is highly mindful of the question of authorship. My intention is thus not only to build on Cristini's research, but also contribute to the modest scholarship on Comrade Literature, which appeared in the 1990s when many *tongzhi* in China began to find a voice through posting private matters in the public domain of cyberspace.

Comrade Literature has emerged as an online, not offline, local literary genre due to the sensitive nature of *tongxinglian* (same-sex eroticism) in China. Comrade Literature primarily features romantic and heart-breaking narratives on same-sex experience in China. Usually, these narratives are posted by email and then edited by website operators (Tong 2004:191). Many of these narratives are set on a (university) BBS, and have been published and re-published on numerous Chinese gay and lesbian websites (Cristini 2005:82).

As an example, *Beijing Gushi* (A Story from Beijing) is a Chinese gay novel which is published online and has been adapted for the film *Lanyu*, directed

by the Hong Kong gay film director Stanley Kwan. *Beijing Gushi* tells a tragic love story about a poor student (Lanyu) and a wealthy businessman (Handong). Lanyu and Handong meet when Lanyu prostitutes himself for money. Handong is Lanyu's first customer. Not without dramas, this sexual transaction is gradually developed into a genuine same-sex relationship. As *Beijing Gushi* ends, Lanyu dies in a car accident. The following is an extract of the story obtained from Remy Cristini's thesis:

> It has been three years now [...] Three years ago, I dreamed every night that he would come back. Astonished and wild with joy, I would ask him: "Aren't you dead? Haven't you died?" Now, three years later, I still have the same dream very often. The difference is that now I keep telling it's just a dream, until I wake up. (Cristini 2005:12)

I offer a taste of *Beijing Gushi* to emphasise that Comrade Literature is of great significance for the gay world in China in meaningful ways. 1) It reflects the harsh reality of the gay world in China, alongside the growing awareness of same-sex identity. 2) It demonstrates the link between online and offline same-sex experience in Chinese society. 3) It captures aspects of the gay world in China that are culturally grounded and shaped by specific characters. 4) It represents a vital part of the cultural heritage of traditional Chinese Literature to embrace the need "to communicate moral and meaning", something the Chinese may call *wenyizaidao* (Cristini 2005:8). In other words, Comrade Literature is a local genre that has its antecedents in other forms of Chinese Literature.

On the other hand, Comrade Literature as an online literary genre provides a valuable space for many gay netizens in China to represent themselves, to themselves and to the wider Chinese community. In particular, the gay web-masters I interviewed insisted on representing themselves to the general public through reporting healthy (*jiankang*) and positive (*zhengmian*) narratives about the (Chinese) same-sex community. This insistence is to avoid negative attention being brought to the already stigmatised same-sex community. For example, gaychinese.net (2006) featured an article on the coming out of a 25 year-old Guangzhou man on its front page, with a photograph capturing the smiling face of a mother and a son, captioned *yonggan de muqin, chujing zhichi tongxinglian erzi* (a courageous mother, appearing in front of the camera to show support for her gay son). To give another example: gay website operators of gaychinese.cn, soyoo.com and Boy21C (2007), whom I interviewed during fieldwork, all think that it is vital to make use of cyberspace as a productive site to formulate

objective (*keguan*) social perceptions of same-sex experience in China (2004, pers.comm., March to May). Tong Ge's (2004:199) study shows that gay and lesbian website operators in China shoulder responsibility for reporting news and telling stories about same-sex experience to the public in a timely (*jishi*), comprehensive (*quanmian*) and neutral (*zhongli*) manner. According to Jiang Hui (2005), over the past six years, gaychinese.cn has posted more than 10,000 news articles and narratives about same-sex practice and gay rights, many of which have been re-posted on other websites.

In short, gay netizens in China show great appreciation for information and knowledge that deals with both domestic and international gay and lesbian literature. Importantly, Comrade Literature is gaining voice and visibility in the gay space of Chinese cyberspace which is increasingly commercialised.

Commercialisation of Gay-oriented Websites

A study by Zhao Yuezhi (1998:1-2) shows that, since 1992, commercial forces have penetrated mass media networks in China, largely due to an introduction of economic reforms and the Open Door Policy. Research generally suggests that the internet industry in China will continue to develop under market mechanisms (Guo Liang 2005; Hughes 2004; Lee 2003; McCormick & Liu 2003; Donald, Keane & Hong 2002; Zhao 1998). In a way, the state government generally considers commercial websites to be a new trend that has a beneficial effect on China's social and economic development. As Karsten Giese (2004:24) comments, internet service providers, both local and foreign, "basically comply with [Chinese] government requirements" because of their interest in making a profit.

The increasing commercialisation of electronic media ownership in China, I argue, has a tendency to challenge the traditional relationship between the party-state and the public sphere. This relationship is steadily transformed by the collective desire of contemporary Chinese society to promote economic development and nation building, while wanting to keep guard against undesirable foreign influence. My argument refuses to subscribe to the mainstream Western model of media commerce, which generally suggests that the practice of online commercialisation typically promotes the consumption and dissemination of entertainment, thereby reducing opportunities for holding public or intellectual debates (McCormick & Liu 2003). In speaking of the online commercial practice in China, I take into consideration the specific cultural and historical conditions

in China. I draw attention to the paradoxical situation in Chinese cyberspace, where a degree of freedom of expression and self-censorship always coexist. Special attention is given to how the increasing commercialisation of electronic media in China allows for the public (mis)representation of individual identities, including same-sex identity. Such is a recent social development, albeit measured, that could never have been imagined before China's opening up.

Indeed, the ever-increasing publicness of electronic media in China, together with much-needed foreign interests and foreign technologies, has given rise to an online commercial culture since the 1990s (McCormick & Liu 2003). There is evidence that electronic media in China are increasingly geared towards commercialism while still conscious of (self)-regulatory control (Lee 2003; Donald & Keane 2002). In other words, there is a connection between the online commercial culture and the party-state. Inevitably, the internet in China is a space in which online commerce can survive only through a kind of self-conscious control. It is also a space in which commercialism thrives on multiple imaginaries by those living both inside and outside China. By this I mean that China is emerging as a massive market and is also collectively imagined as a potential market to initiate a consumer "revolution". The internet in China is imagined as a channel to reach out to a global consumer market, alongside global flows of businesses, capital, commodities, and consumers. Online commerce in China is targeted at the masses (*qunzhong*) who are thought by both local and foreign investors to have great potential purchasing power.

To what extent does online commercialism in China, and elsewhere, shape same-sex identity? For some researchers, online commercialism has significant implications for the (mis)representation of same-sex identity in cyberspace. Jonathan Alexander (2002:100) states that some gay website operators resist "normalization by commodification in that they refuse to mark/market their Web pages as only gay sites" for commercial purposes. Chris Berry and Fran Martin (2003:88) even go to the extent to argue that the financial circumstances of websites "have determining effects on the online subjectivities of those involved in them". Similarly, Jiang Hui (2005) urges us to consider the material reality in Chinese cyberspace, where many gay and lesbian websites operate initially on a non-profit making basis, but with a significant increase in operational costs, many of them have become partially or fully commercialised. According to Jiang, some of these websites have to work with telecommunications companies to provide services of text messaging on a mobile phone at a cost. Guo Yaqi (2005:119)

reports that the website Boy21C (2007) worked as an advertising agent for a Tianjin gay bar in May 2003. Again, Boy21C (2007) signed a contract with two local bars in an attempt to increase the revenue for its website between May and October 2003 (Guo Yaqi 2005:119).

What is more, many of the advertisements on (gay-oriented) websites in China are becoming commercialised or even sexualised. For example, the website yiyeqing.com (2007) is operating as an online shopping corner selling sex toys for all sorts of sex acts, SM outfits and products, aphrodisiacs, erotic literature, porno VCDs, contraceptives, and so on. Another example is Yuxin Ebiz Company Ltd. PRC (2007) which posts advertisements with captions such as *xing'ai yanchang banxiaoshi* (prolonged sexual intercourse for another half an hour), *yinjing zengda* (penile enlargement) and *nüyin suoxiao* (vaginal reduction). It is generally agreed that gay netizens in China are targeted as potential consumers, taking interest in such commercial goods as sex toys, sexual health products, erotic DVD/VCDs, sexy lingerie, and so on.

Online commercialism in China also coexists with the growing sexualisation in Chinese cyberspace, including the gay space in Chinese cyberspace. Despite a ban on online pornography, sexually explicit images do exist. For instance, there have been female bloggers who post titillating details and images. Mumu, Furong Jiejie, Liumangyan, Mu Zimei and Zhuying Qingtong are female bloggers known by many Chinese netizens. They have gained fame and fortune from publishing sensational narratives on sex and sexual encounters. Presently, there is also a huge number of adult websites (*chengren wangzhan*) characterised by strong sexual overtones.

The internet has somewhat changed the ways Chinese ordinary citizens are exposed to sexually explicit images. Quite characteristically, these images are posted online for public viewing. It is claimed that these images are taken by self photo-taking (*zipai*). Such images are both amateur and audacious. They capture both female and male genitalia, often enlarged and highlighted, while concealing the face of those who are being photographed. The reason for this can probably be explained by Jonathan Alexander (2002:80), who suggests that cyberspace is a safe space for those who wish to explore their identities and selves, but are apprehensive about serious personal and political repercussions. In contemporary China, this practice of self photo-taking seems to appeal to an increasing number of individuals who attempt to talk back to authority or look for fame and fortune.

As a general rule, gay-oriented websites in China seldom provide links to sexually provocative images. If they do, they are often shut down very quickly. This partly explains why some gay-oriented websites have chosen to register abroad in order to claim more authorial autonomy. The two websites gaychinese.net and gztz.org have been hosted abroad. Gay-oriented websites in China rarely display stark naked bodies, but they occasionally display pictures of young-looking people, mostly semi-naked, underwear-clad masculine men.

Online commercialism has led many Chinese (gay-oriented) websites to focus on providing netizens with various forms of entertainment such as online dating, gambling and interactive games. Online entertainment is increasingly integrated into a wide spectrum of both the homosexual and heterosexual communities to the extent that it has become a social phenomenon. In recent years, this phenomenon has become the subject of press reports and raised the concerns particularly of political leaders, educators, community leaders, and parents. As shown in Hong Yin's study,

> commercialization [in China] has challenged the centrality of official ideology while the trend towards hedonist and individualist values found in entertainment fare has eroded the moral standards cherished by state ideology. (Hong 2002:33)

What does this online commercialism tell us about the gay space in Chinese cyberspace? As emphasised before, most of the gay-oriented websites in China lack financial support and survive on limited funding donated by international voluntary groups or members of the same-sex community. Increasingly, they are dependent on revenues generated from advertisements, memberships, sponsorships and donations. This reality is also complicated by the fact that gay-oriented websites in China are affected by two major factors: 1) a limited support from policy makers and the wider community and 2) a lack of available resources and technical expertise. These two factors considerably hinder online representation of same-sex identity as an individual identity.

Electronic Technology and Identity

To sum up, the advent of the internet in China has opened up a whole sphere for a public articulation of Chinese same-sex identity in ways that could never have been imagined before *kaifang* (opening up). Many (gay) citizens and netizens in China genuinely believe that cyberspace is an important space for promoting the expression of identity or individuality (Guo Liang 2005). Yet, it is important

to stress that the party-state's control over "free" speech in cyberspace has been tightened. In fact, what is happening is a merely a loosening rather than a losing of control over electronic media.

This paper is a contribution to research into the relationship between electronic technology and identity. I have used cyber anthropology as a research methodology to problematise this relationship. This methodology has enabled me, as a researcher and a participant netizen, to observe and analyse how identity is actively played out in a space that is both imagined and real. I have also drawn from scholarship in internet research in China and media research to probe into questions of self-censorship, commercialisation and identity reinvention. This task has helped me identify contradictions that are specific to the gay space in Chinese cyberspace, where freedom/control and homogeneity/diversity coexist. Significantly, such contradictions have heightened my sensitivity to how gay netizens in China find new ways to imagine a collective identity and community across local, national and international borders. I have stressed that the internet in China offers an interactive medium for many Chinese gay netizens to link up through thoughts and interests across boundaries; and most importantly, create a collective imaginary for a shared identity or community. Very crucially, the internet affords an enormous increase in "communities of imagination and interest", which are characteristically "diasporic" (Appadurai, cited in Gottlieb & McLelland 2003:1). I have also pointed out that the internet is capable of creating as much homogeneity as diversity in the gay space in Chinese space by circulating hegemonic ideas about aspects of international gay and lesbian practices and lifestyles. And yet, many of these ideas are fragmentary and sometimes distorted.

I have provided evidence of the development of a gay space in Chinese cyberspace. The need for coming out of isolation into a network of perceived safety and anonymity is a primary reason for an explosion of many gay and lesbian websites in China. The emergence of Comrade Literature (*tongzhi wenxue*) on these websites reflects this need. Comrade Literature, exploring same-sex themes through fine works and literature, is not merely about imagining a shared identity or community across the globe, but virtually about all the social aspects of what it means to be gay or lesbian in contemporary China.

Gay-oriented websites in China encounter certain difficulties. Mainly, many of them are becoming commercialised or sexualised due to an increase in operating costs, causing them to run as online shopping corners, advertising agents,

entertainment centres or telecommunications companies. These activities are organised in order to increase revenue for the websites and hardly represent the interests or perspectives of the Chinese same-sex community, thereby undermining their agency. Finally, the reality of strict online censorship in China raises important questions about how gay and lesbian website operators establish their authorial autonomy or represent same-sex identity via electronic media.

It is against this background that, throughout this chapter, I have been arguing how online commercialism ensures misrepresentation of same-sex identity and produces as much homogeneity as diversity in the gay space of Chinese cyberspace, where control, self-censorship and freedom coexist.

This paper has offered a few glimpses of the websites under discussion. These websites are not identified to represent the complexity and ambiguity of the gay space in Chinese cyberspace. Obviously, given the ambitious and broad-based theoretical background of this paper, there are gaps or omissions. It is my intention that the following questions can provide food for thought for future research into the gay space in Chinese cyberspace. 1) How does the gay space compare to other spaces in Chinese cyberspace? 2) What difference does the Chinese internet make for the Chinese same-sex community? 3) How do online and offline Chinese same-sex communities compare? 4) And how is the Chinese online same-sex community different from other online same-sex communities?

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ICCGL see Information Clearinghouse for Chinese Gays & Lesbians

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Appendix: Examples of Chinese Gay-oriented Websites

http://www.gaychinese.net
http://www.boysky.com
http://www.csssm.org
http://friend.qdeol.com.cn/20031213.htm
http://www.homosky.com/2002/
http://xzz.9xc.com/2003/index.htm
http://www.nmtz.net/
http://www.gengle.net/
http://www.notearsky.com/
http://www.chinalala.com/
http://www.21cnboy.com/
http://www.lescn.net/main.asp
http://www.lalaclub.net/
http://www.5iboy.net/
http://www.xiaobie.com/
http://www.99575.com/map.htm
http://www.bjboy.net/
http://lalachat.xiloo.com/
http://www.weandwe.com/2002/
http://zqlala.9126.com/
http://www.chinatongzhi.com/
http://www.98boy.com
http://www.tianyaclub.com/
http://www.gaychina.com
http://www.boyair.com
http://www.lescn.net/index2004.asp
http://www.lalabar.com
http://www.aladao.net
http://www.bjtongzhi.com
http://www.gztongzhi.com
http://www.tianjincool.com