A CASE STUDY OF DOUBAN: SOCIAL NETWORK COMMUNITIES AND WEB2.0 IN CHINA

by

HO KIU-CHOR[*]

Established since 26th March of 2005, the social network service of "Douban.com" has accumulated 317,532 members by the 16th of November 2006.[1] In a nation-wide survey "Web2.0 100 of China Internet Industry", Douban is being rated as the 3rd largest service provider.

With the main features of web2.0 applications, Douban allows its users to contribute to the multiple-media cataloguing system and display their media consumption experiences. This has made it possible for the users to form ever-growing virtual communities within and across the national boundaries of China as well as the Greater China region.

This paper aims at exploring the socio-cultural impact of Douban's success and its implication on social networking web applications on Chinese communities. Based on individual users' interests in books, films, music and magazines, the large number of Chinese computer literate users are being connected on the Douban platform. Together they are contributing, sharing, displaying and forming interests groups on the basis of their respective media and cultural experiences. Despite their social differences, users from Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan, and all other parts of the world seem to find a space of commonality in Douban and are reconstructing the cultural meaning of their Chinese identities by by an autonomous process to realize an imagined Chinese community online.

---

[*]   College Lecturer, School of Professional and Continuing Education, The University of Hong Kong

[1]   Three different tracking points of Douban membership were taken in 2006. To the date of 31st August there were 247,272 members online. In two months' time, its members have increased to 301,846 (as dated on 1st November 2006), that means a 22% increase. In two weeks' time, from the 1st to the 16th of November, its membership has increased by 5.19%.

INTERNET IN CHINA [1]

As China becomes a world power, there is an increased concern towards the Internet development in China. In the context of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s ownership and editorial control, it is evident that its firm grips of the media has been loosened through its pursuit of economic growth.

As suggested by Chin-chuan Lee , the numerous Internet content providers and discussion forums have challenged the traditional media's monopoly on informing the public of major happenings. The borderless nature of the Internet has also made it difficult for the administration to exert editorial control. Online publications and discussion forums have greater freedom than the traditional media and have thus contributed to the creation of a more open public sphere by expanding the social distribution of ideas and information.

In light of this development, it seems comprehensible to hold expectations towards Internet for its potentiality to transform China. "Internet is a democratizing force, and China seems an ideal test case for this presumption," said Kluver and Yang who have conducted a meta-review of Chinese Internet studies. They found that the political implications of the technology prevails is a key concern for the academy. Scholars are inclined to study the set government control of the Internet, and the development of China's Internet infrastructure is on the top of agenda. They observed "some issues related to China's Internet remain virtually unexplored by scholarly analysis, such as the impact of new media on Chinese culture and the nonpolitical aspects of society." They also felt that most of the existing Internet studies failed to "seek to create a fuller understanding of the myriad ways in which the Internet might potentially affect Chinese life."

In this study of Douban, Internet and online communications remain the central theme but I would try to explore further into the cultural dynamics and political implications brought by the Internet. My later analysis shows that it is actually impossible to break down and isolate the two dimensions of culture and politics. I would adopt a "micro"-level analysis that read closely into the experiences of the individual users or the ways in which the technology is appropriated by Chinese to enact new social configurations I argue that technological changes could exert influences on culture while in

cultural changes would also have significant political implications. This is profoundly important for the social contexts of different Chinese regions, particularly the major cities of the Greater China (like Hong Kong, Taipei, Shanghai and Beijing), as they are undergoing more rapid growth in economic integration and cultural exchanges.

ONLINE ACTIVITIES AND INTERACTIONS IN DOUBAN [2]

For Douban users, creating an account and logging in to Douban enables them to become a unique netizen with individualistic personae, in the following ways. Firstly, they can expose themselves to oceans of books, films and other cultural items, all the items could be collected virtually in a symbolic way – the individual user's page will display all the items that one has collected. Secondly, they could personalize their item-list by creating their own cataloguing system by separating the items into "consumed" ones and "desired but not yet obtained" ones, as well as adding their own "tags" onto every single item. Thirdly, users are also able to rate and comment on the items, and read how others have talked about them and give their feedbacks.

Douban is itself a large-sized virtual community, by holding a Douban account the user signifies a certain degree of activeness in the Chinese online sphere. Other than that, if one finds some other users who share similar taste and preference with he/she, the users can be added to one's own contact list. Douban facilitates intra-network mail system (the "doumails") and allows private exchange of information and ideas among users. Another way to be part of virtual communities is joining or creating his/her own interest groups and participate in different thematic topics.[2] Some examples of these groups are "Google fans", "Guangzhou Douban users", "Taiwanese Independent Music", "We love cool jokes" and "Antique bookshop lovers".

With these basic functions operating in the website, the 317,532 accounts[3] are constantly creating, producing and reproducing innumerable flows of exchange. I am intrigued by the phenomenon that many users, including myself, are keen to take part in Douban to keep their documentation of cul-

---

[2] Interest groups are effective ways to get people together for further exchange of views and feelings, on a publicly accessible page generated specifically to that group which looks like simplified version of a BBS forum. As at 13th November 2006 there are 18,057 groups in Douban

[3] Generally one Douban account should belong to an individual user, but there is duplicate number of users as some individual users hold several accounts.

tural consumptions regularly updated. Underneath the surface of sharing individual's passion towards their books, music and films, what are the driving forces for all the Chinese users from different Chinese cities to gather together and do they know where they are going?

To explore the above issues, I have been participating and observing the Douban activities as a regular user since May 2005. [The research questions mainly emerge from my own experiences with Douban. For this study, I have interviewed 14 Douban users, 7 from mainland China, 5 from Taiwan and 2 from Hong Kong.

The interview questions include: (1) what are the experiences of the Douban users and how they have made use of the online exchange platforms; and (2) how their experiences online and offline in relation to other users from different Chinese cities create new understandings of their own Chinese identities. (3) Why do they want meet other people from other cities? What do we want to get out of the connections? And where will that lead us to?

In my earlier project of Hong Kong young women's personal websites and their changing gender roles, my co-researchers and I have already noted that there exists no absolute boundary between online or offline living experiences and thus we argued that it is important to look at the interaction between their online and offline life. Along this line, I focus on exploring how the users' online and offline activities are inscribed to each other, without distinctive boundaries and how these experiences of netizens figure in their understanding of themselves as Chinese.

DOUBAN – A COMMUNAL PLATFORM FOR CONTEMPORARY CHINESE CULTURAL IDENTITY [3]

An initial analysis of the Douban users' geographic distribution shows that there are nearly 50,000 users who are inhabited in mainland China, nearly 1,000 in Hong Kong and 300 in Taiwan (as at 15th November 2006). The number of registered accounts has kept a steady growth in the past 1.5 years, which means that netizens of different Chinese regions are attracted to this online platform. I am interested to explore what Douban activities mean to users' Chinese cultural identities, when they are voluntarily subscribing themselves to the platform which facilitates cross-border cultural

exchanges between users from different regions.

When many users first registered and started using Douban, they are amazed to find that that Chinese language as a major medium for communication could mean such unhindered and convenient communication among Chinese users all over the world. Despite the fact that some users have difficulty in reading simplified Chinese or traditional Chinese due to different language policies of Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, all seem to have a refreshed perception towards Chinese as their mother language. Some interviewees, for example, A, B. C. said that they have never had any direct conversation with other Chinese people outside their original region until they first came to Douban. It has been an unprecedented exciting experience for the users to find themselves able to be connected to other Chinese netizens. By sharing with each other about their favourite books, music and films, no matter it is a French literature or a Japanese film, the items are (or will be) shared among many different users, at different times and places in diversified ways.

Specifically, I have tracked down the item-list of Mooch, a Hong Kong Douban user, to find that she has registered 255 books, 196 CDs and 613 films (dated as 14th November 2006) under her account. Mooch has added different tags to indicate the items' regions of origin. Nearly one third of films are locally produced in Hong Kong, all other items are dispersedly coming from Japan, America and Europe. In the interview with Mooch, she said that she has much interest in Taiwanese independent music and seldom does she register items of local artists. For books that she has read, they are mostly written in or translated to Chinese, from authors of different nations. Such pattern of cultural consumption is ubiquitous in the Douban website. It seems to be a typical case for illustrating Gordon Mathew's theory of "cultural supermarket" , which considers the identity project of individuals a constructive process of consuming global information of commodities. In the case of Douban users, it is interesting to note that while they like Western products, they would pay special focus and attention to Chinese products.

This should not surprise the Chinese netizens, as "globalization" has become a common sense reality for most modern people in contemporary cities. However, it is actually a fact under-exposed to most Chinese people, earlier than Douban, people get to learn the information of new cultural items from a

wide range of sources, ranging from a magazine, fan clubs to book-lover's on-line forum; such space for readers' cultural exchange is rather localized and of a much smaller scale and influence. So many users who have previously tended to believe that, their preferences of cultural commodities are their own 'personal taste' and thus 'uniquely belongs to only a limited amount of people'. However, one never fails, virtually, to find "comrades" who shares similar interest on Douban. This has made them realize how their lives are connected by global forces. And more importantly, even in a global cultural supermarket, by reviewing the cultural items one has consumed one may have to admit that, Chinese cultural products have significant place in his/her upbringing. Those Chinese books may be popular novels written by Hong Kong authors, or CDs produced by Taiwanese singers, or films produced by mainland Chinese directors… yet those items are actually experienced in a "transnational" manner, hundreds of mainland Chinese, Hong Kong and Taiwanese users have come to discover that, there are many overlapping cultural elements in their daily lives.

For Mooch, her favourite music group "Tizzy Bac" is an alternative Taiwanese band. Their music is nearly unknown to most Hong Kong users. But on Douban she has met a lot of their fans who are located in mainland China who are university students of different Chinese cities, like Hangzhou and Chengdu. In fact she had initially learnt about the band by Douban's recommendation.

"So now I have identified several mainland users as my major source of music information. I trust their preferences. I get used to see what CD items they have added and then I'll search for them. Most of the time I won't get disappointed," Mooch said.

According to Mr. Yang Bo, the founder of Douban, the mechanism is somehow inspired, if not imitated, from Amazon.com, from which people get powerful engines of the company's server to locate people who with shared preference and through them they get the best recommendations. Just that this mechanism might not be widely used in any cyber context familiar to Chinese netizens, as Douban was one of the pioneer sites to build upon Web2.0 model.

What makes this important is, Chinese netizens have not conceived that such mechanism could actually work out among different Chinese people.

The computer-mediated technology has enabled micro-level encounters between individual users – not being represented by mainstream media, nor scholar research, nor social and political institutions, to meet online as individuals who stand for themselves.

A few years ago, I have already learnt from my mainland Chinese friends that they are familiar with Hong Kong and Taiwan's popular culture through television programs and films. But when I first came to Douban, I was still impressed by the intensity and extensiveness of shared cultural experiences among different Chinese netizens – the books we read, the films we see, the music we listen to, are not really confined to our own city cultures. The Douban website has formed a huge Chinese network of cultural interests in the cyberspace. With any individual users as nodes, the network is a flexible social structure, allowing free flow of information in-and-out.

In his classical study of the formation of nation as an imagined community, Benedict Anderson stated that, the nation is imagined as the members never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communication, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as "a deep, horizontal comradeship". Such imagination is fostered and founded upon print-languages by "creation of unified fields of exchange and communication".

Douban emerges as a technologically driven platform which enables Chinese netizens from different parts of the world to transcend the physical national borders and other clearly & vaguely defined political and national boundaries. For many users, the Douban platform serves as an initial practice of "seeing and hearing from" other Chinese peoples. Its function is comparable to the print media in the early era, to make exchange between unknown community members possible and to lay foundation for an imagined consciousness of "Chinese" as a shared national identity.

While all cultural items are being introduced and commented by users located in different parts of the world, they always communicated in Chinese. This mode of cultural exchange is rather new to Chinese netizens. For them, Douban appears to be something between "local" and "global". As Taiwanese user Haeshu said, "we are not interacting with total strangers as some of us often do in English mediated websites, but we are also indeed

meeting some new people; just surprisingly enough we could naturally talk to each other by using the same old language."

If "print-capitalism" has given a new fixity to language, and in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation , the Douban users' experience of affirming the unifying power of Chinese language among community members, would mean a lot to the development of the imagined community of Chinese nation.

The metaphor of the imagined communities is useful to describe the processes of Douban interactions and explains how a shared sense of closeness is generated in the Chinese societies that seem to be lacking before technology has allowed things to happen. "Virtual communities produce common spaces in a sea of technologically connected people in a world of isolation and deconstruction of community and identity." Douban the website, as a wholistic form and at the same time a platform of many other virtual communities, demonstrated how the historically and politically deconstructed Chinese identity could find new ways of connection.

Some may argue that, Douban users are only forming network of interests, tastes or talents, which could hardly be significant in the wide realms of developing modern China. To assert greater impact, netizens who actively engage in political discussions and those ready for mobilizing social movements should be the locomotives. Guobin Yang reported his research on the BBS and website which has formed an "online Chinese cultural sphere"[4]. He argues that the Chinese-language portal sites are serving as the backbone for a transnational Chinese cultural sphere. Chinese users show a strong desire to become better informed and more critically engaged through online communications:

"These spaces are based both inside and outside China, yet technologically, and to a considerable extent socially, they are linked to global networks. These spaces are globally accessible, discourse in them flows globally, and publics are linked across national boundaries."

Apparently, the BBS and forum discussions have more significant impact of nurturing a Chinese community than Douban. The Internet's impact is significant as evidence suggests that several protests are mobilized in a

---

[4] Guobin Yan has delineated the key features of the sphere: internet-based, dominant language of communication in Chinese, and publics (or users) mainly drawn from what Tu Wei-ming calls 'cultural China'.

global context and they have impinged on civil society development. But as informed by my interviewees, there is a huge number of Chinese netizens who are not prepared to engage in "hard core" political and social discussions in such public sphere. The Douban users show a tendency to the apparently apolitical nature of cultural exchange rather than discussing current affairs. They are attracted to Douban because they seem to only want to share their favourite books and films rather than engaging in politics. The website accommodates a friendly atmosphere and particularly non-threatening and de-politized online sphere for all these Chinese users who do not like to engage or confront with hard-core discussions on the social and political development of Chinese societies. I argue that, this kind of cultural community is not less important than other forms of online communications or political institutions in the way they create and fashion a new Chinese nationality. In fact, it has unprecedented political potentiality for the development of the Greater China which should be explored further.

CHINESE IDENTITY AS
SELF-PROJECTS OF DOUBAN USERS [4]

In July 2006, I had to make a three-week trip to Shanghai, the famous Chinese city totally unknown to me. Without optimistic expectation, I sent out "Doumails" to seek advices from Shanghai users. I got many friendly responses and one of them even suggested to show me around during my stay. This experience has actually inspired me to conduct analysis of Douban's cultural role in connecting the Chinese users. Therefore in the interviews I tried to understand why we all want to meet each other in our daily life. Where does the desire to connect come from? What do we want to know from each other? And where will that lead us to?

The construction of Chinese identity by utilizing the emergent web technologies like Douban should be attended to more closely for it may provide us with insights on how changes in technological infrastructure could be related to socio-cultural development. Under the web2.0 principals, Douban is designated to be a site of user-generated contents. It means that the Douban infrastructure emphasizes every individual user's autonomy and the whole site is conceptualized with a bottom-up model. I argue that, the direction of Internet technology development is envisioning and vitalizing a

possibility for autonomous cultural projects by which individuals would become the major forces of social reconstruction.

People are now entering a modern era which allows creation of self-definition . It seems less utopist to anticipate that, reconstruction of the society will be "proceeding from autonomous projects carried out by society members. This independence from institutions and organizations can be regarded as individual or collective, in the later case in relation to a specific social group defined by its autonomous culture."

Douban is possibly a site to realize their "attempt to reconstruct meaning in a new social structure on the basis their self-defined projects." Scholars have quite consensual affirmation on the impact of Internet upon cultural identities. "Internet influences the construction of individual identity, as individuals increasingly rely on their own resources to construct a coherent identity for themselves in an open process of self formation as a symbolic project through the utilization of symbolic materials available to them."

Quite a lot of Douban users share a desire to be connected with other Chinese people via the social networking service. Summer, a Taiwanese interview, said that he has chosen Douban (a site originated from mainland China) instead of other similar service providers of Taiwan because he wanted to meet more mainland Chinese users. For all the interviewees, regardless of their current social locations, hold different degree of willingness to reach out to people beyond their national border and get to know other Chinese users at Douban.

Although none of them admitted that they are intentionally building their own personal network in the Greater China region for instrumental reasons, all interviewees said that they are interested in meeting different Chinese users. One of my interviewees, ChuQing, a mainland Chinese user said that, "I would love to meet different people from other Chinese cities as it symbolizes more possibilities in life." Summer, the Taiwanese user who deliberately opens a Douban account to meet mainland users, explained, "Taiwan and China will eventually reunite and even though not in political sense, people are getting closer and closer culturally". To my understanding, some users are more proactive to realization of their curiosity and desire of connection while others are less so but still welcomes such opportunities. For all interviewees, they are pleased to see that Douban users

from different regions are getting along well online. I asked if they find users from other regions radically different, all of them deny this and insisted that they believe that similarity and shared interest are more dominant among all Chinese users.

Moreover, the different Chinese users are affluently and substantially expressing their interests in cultural activities of other Chinese regions. BTR, a user from Shanghai, claims that he regularly updates himself with the Douban database to keep track with the newly published books of Hong Kong and Taiwan. He is particularly interested in the independent music groups of Hong Kong and Taiwan, but shows no interests in the counterparts of mainland China. The interest group called "Taiwanese independent music lovers" and "Hong Kong independent music lovers" have nearly 1,800 and 1,000 members respectively. One of the bigger interest groups is "Cheer Chen", a Taiwanese independent female singer whose songs are written in mostly Mandarin lyrics and occasionally in English. The interest group has 3,556 users (as at 16th November 2006) consisting of users from all different regions.

The commonly observed yearning for other Chinese region's culture does not seem to merely stem from exoticism. It could be traceable if we consider how the forces of attraction are operating. The mainland Chinese users aspire to the "cosmopolitan culture" of Hong Kong which usually imagined as "a gateway to Western cultural elements". As mainland and Taiwanese interviews suggested, "British colonial rule has left Hong Kong certain unique qualities." The Hong Kong and mainland Chinese users are both attracted to the sentimental, artistic and energetic cultural atmosphere of Taiwanese music and films. Hong Kong and Taiwanese users are eagerly yearning for the cultural development of mainland China as a rising power as in the case of Summer, the Taiwanese interviewee who works for a company which is developing a new branch in Shanghai. I would interpret the users' aspirations as curiosity, as desire to learn how other Chinese people are living 'out there', as an autonomous attempts collectively expressed and realized on Douban. It is reasonable to leave a remark here, that Chinese netizens' self-identity projects are driven by connected imaginations of a powerful united cultural China, which means temporarily unchallenged by actual power struggles or resource allocations among different Chinese so-

cieties. Notwithstanding the possible disputes, the imaginative forces cannot be undermined as they bear significant impact in real social settings.

CONCLUSION [5]

Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, these Chinese societies are long separated by either colonial history or political disputes. For long enough the Chinese diaspora has meant the substantial loss of national identity . After reunification of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 and the apparent failure of independent-advocacy by Taiwanese governor Chen Shui-Bian, the Chinese societies which are constantly undergoing transformation, seem to be stagnated with contestant and instable definition of national boundaries. In spite of the political restlessness, the individual Chinese netizens are seeking their own meaning of "being Chinese" for themselves in the cyberspace. Facilitated by digital communal platform like Douban, they come to meet each other by learning about each others cultural tastes and preferences and seize the chances to expand the common interests to further cultural exchange.

The cultural exchange on Douban, though considered to be "not sufficiently deep for real understanding" according to my interviewees Yizheng, TSW and Bobo2Mata. The online dialogues have already cultivated a more intimate sense of shared identity among users from different Chinese regions. The informational capitalism may possibly lay a foundation to an imagined community of Chinese as a national entity, which could be regarded as a restructuring tool of the Greater Chinese society. This transformation brought by various computer-mediated technologies would not be purely 'cultural', its political implication is not yet prominent but it will serve as an underlying force for further unification among different Chinese communities at least at the level of cultural integration if not political unification.

Lots of findings and evidence could be drawn to suggest that regions of the Greater China has been economically and socially merging, although politics and political ideologies remain an obstacle for Chinese reunification, the Chinese netizens of Douban are perhaps moving forward to prepare for further convergence by cultural exchanges and identification with what seems foreign but still Chinese.

REFERENCE

[1] Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London & New York: Verso.

[2] Cardoso, G. (2006). Societies in Transition to the Network Society. In M. Castells & G. Cardoso (Eds.), *The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy* (pp. 23-70). Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University.

[3] Castells, M., & Ince, M. (2003). *Conversations with Manuel Castells*. Cambridge, UK Malden, MA: Polity Press.

[4] Communication & Development Center of Internet Society of China. (2006). Internet society of China Communication and Development Centre's Web2.0 100 of China Internet Industry Report. Retrieved 4th November, 2006, from http://www.internetdigital.org/report/web20100list.html

[5] Ho, K.-C., Tang, W. S.-H., & Ho, P. S.-Y. (2007). Cyber Self-Centres? Young Hong Kong Women and Their Personal Websites. In K. E. Kuah-Pearce (Ed.), *Log in: Chinese Women and Cyber Empowerment*.

[6] Huang, C. (2003). Transitional Media vs. Normative Theories: Schramm, altschull, and China. *The Journal of Communication, 53*(3), 444.

[7] Kluver, R., & Yang, C. (2005). The Internet in China: A Meta-Review of Research. *The Information Society, 21*, 301-308.

[8] Lee, C.-c. (2003). *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*. London, New York: Routledge.

[9] Ma, L. J. C., & Cartier, C. L. (2003). *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.

[10] Mathews, G. (2000). *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*. London; New York: Routledge.

[11] Qiu, J. L., & Chan, J. M. (2004). China internet studies: A review of the field. In H. Nissenbaum & M. Price (Eds.), *The academy & the internet* (pp. 275-307). New York: Peter Lang.

[12]Tu, W.-M. (1994). Cultural china: The periphery as the center. In W.-M. Tu (Ed.), *The living tree: The changing meaning of being chinese today* (pp. 1-34). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

[13] Tubella, I. (2006). Television and Internet in the Construction of Identity. In M. Castells & G. Cardoso (Eds.), *The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy* (pp. 257-268). Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University.

[14] Wang, G. (2004). The Fourth Rise of China: Cultural Implications. *China: An International Journal, 2*(2), 311-322.

[15] Yang, G. (2003). The Internet and the Rise of a Transnational Chinese Cultural Sphere. *Media, Culture & Society, 25*(4), 469-490.

[16] Zurawski, N. (2002). Ideas and Metaphors of Space on the Internet. And How These Help or Restrict us in Research - Conference version, 3nd October 2002 for AoIR Conference 2002. Retrieved 16th November, 2006, from http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/kriminol/surveillance/space_metaphors.html