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Active citizens, good citizens, and insouciant bystanders: The educational implications of Chinese university students' civic participation via social networking

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This virtual ethnographic study explores how Chinese university students use social network sites (SNSs) to participate in civic activities. An ideal of *active* citizens is contrasted with *good* citizens (Crick) and insouciant bystanders. We find that students engage with the civic issues embedded in everyday life; their online civic preferences are often linked to their course of study; their participation may involve overcoming technological controls; and they have difficulty in translating their interest in life-politics (Giddens) from online to offline. We conclude that in China SNSs do open up space for civic participation by youth, but do not yet constitute an idealized public sphere (Habermas). Thus, there is a need to develop citizenship education that encourages young people to reflect on their online practice and develop critical online and offline civic participation.

Keywords: social network sites; civic participation; cyber democracy; citizenship education; civic literacy

Young people in the age of social network sites

Digital media have the potential to provide young people with a new way of engaging in civic life and to develop democratic citizenship. Many of those who are equipped with digital media are employing the internet to participate in political and social activities, such as online voting, volunteering, philanthropy, protesting, demonstrating, signing petitions, and boycotting products (Banaji and Buckingham, 2010; Montgomery, 2008; Kann *et al*., 2007; Bachen *et al*., 2008). Not all young people have access to digital technologies and historically there has been a digital divide which isolates many rural, poor, and technologically illiterate youth (Tapscott, 1998). However, the possibilities of youth civic participation have increased notably since the advent of 'Web 2.0' technology. This takes the form of social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter.

Rapidly developing SNSs have attracted millions of young people all over the world (Kear, 2011; Livingstone and Brake, 2010; Martínez-Alemán and Wartman, 2009). Based on computers and mobile devices and driven by online or offline friendships, SNSs dramatically promote communication, collaboration, and information-sharing across networks of contacts, creating an interactive and participative online culture (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Childnet International, 2008). Such expanding networks may stimulate public dialogues, negotiations, or debates, which helps to construct a 'public sphere' (Habermas, 1974) where citizens voluntarily come together, freely express their opinions, and discuss public issues on the basis of equality. From a Habermasian perspective, as citizens participate in deliberative expression, debate, and decision-making, new forms of democratic citizenship may be produced and citizens can be educated by their own experience. However, it may additionally require an educational response beyond the well-established transmission of civic values, knowledge, and skills by formal education, if

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young cyber-citizens are to recognize opportunities to engage ethically and critically with the public sphere beyond cyberspace. In other words, if there is to be an opportunity to build more deliberative and democratic offline communities in their universities, neighbourhoods, organizations, and regions.

In the age of SNSs, a number of studies have started to explore whether and how SNSs can contribute to fostering active citizens who work within a public sphere. For example, it is argued that young people nowadays highlight their interests, practise their debating and discussion skills, and build trust relationships via SNSs (Childnet International, 2008). Some studies report that young people's intensity of SNS use is related to increased civic participation (Burgess *et al*., 2006; Zhang *et al*., 2010). However, SNSs cannot entirely compensate for a perceived disengagement from traditional politics that is often characterized as youth apathy towards civic duty (Valenzuela *et al*., 2009). In fact it appears that SNS users are more likely to hold political interests but less likely to take part in traditional political activities than the users of other media (Baumgartner and Morris, 2010). While previous research pays more attention to the context of the US, Australia, the UK, and other European countries and raises questions rather than provides answers, a few studies have begun to look in detail at China, where there are 167 million people under 30 years old using SNSs for various purposes (CNNIC, 2011). It is in this context that we undertook a small-scale empirical research project to examine the extent to which an SNS enables Chinese young people's civic participation, encourages political debate, and supports social campaigning led by these users. Details are given below.

Our four research questions were: What are the civic issues that concern young people most? What factors affect their civic participation? In what ways do they participate in civic activities? And what results of participation do they achieve? In summary, we find that the Chinese young people we surveyed currently perform more like good citizens or insouciant bystanders than the ideal of active citizens that was promoted strongly in England by Bernard Crick (Crick and Lockyer, 2010). Thus, we argue that SNSs contribute to informal civic participation by youth, but do not necessarily nurture active citizens who are well-prepared with citizenship literacy and thus are able to make positive contributions to their community.

Civic participation and three categories of citizens

Our initial working definition of 'civic participation' focuses on discussions and actions linked to political and social dimensions. 'Civic' implies notions of the public sphere, referring not only to individual freedoms but also to citizens' capacities to work together for a common aim. The public sphere respects freedom of association, and freedom of expression for both individuals and the media. It gives citizens an essentially democratic space to debate and enjoy equal rights to express themselves. Thus the public sphere enables citizens to negotiate and deal with public affairs together (Habermas, 1974, 1989). 'Civic participation' is a way to the construction of a public sphere and it involves citizens engaging in activities, including discussions, that relate to politics or public policies (Bennett *et al*., 2006). Civic participation also implies community involvement, which is one of the core aims of citizenship education in England (Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 1998; Annette, 2008).

Literature on citizenship education frequently presents active citizenship as an ideal and a goal (Ross, 2008; Ireland *et al*., 2006; Nelson and Kerr, 2006). As defined in the national curriculum for England, active citizens are those who are: 'willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting' (Qualification and Curriculum Authority, 1998: 7). In this way active citizens help construct civil society and sustain social solidarity (Crick and Lockyer, 2010; Blunkett and Taylor, 2010).

Active citizens are also defined in opposition to 'good citizens', who tend to obey the law, be polite and well-behaved, respect individual rights, address moral virtues of care and concern for others, be good neighbours, and generally relegate ideas of the good life to their private sphere (Crick and Lockyer, 2010). The concept of 'good citizen' implies a normative view of citizenship that encourages conformity and is thus essentially conservative. However, the construction or framing of the good citizen is not neutral or objective, but reflects the results of political struggles to foreground dominant discourses that do not threaten the status quo (Pykett *et al*., 2010).

Good citizens in China are praised for their loyalty to the motherland and the Communist Party of China (CPC), their submissive behaviours, and their deep reflection on personal virtues. Chinese education, which emphasizes moral and ideological principles, aims to produce such 'good citizens' (Lee and Ho, 2008). The CPC defines the outcomes of its citizenship and moral education programmes as 'qualified socialist citizens'. In other words, citizens that have awareness about 'citizenship and socialist concepts of democracy, the rule of law, freedom, equality, equity and justice' (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOEPRC), 2010: 10). 'Socialist concepts' here means that there is an official CPC understanding of the meaning of democracy, freedom, and justice that good citizens are expected to adhere to and not challenge. There is little expectation that good citizens will apply critical faculties to the state of democracy or the application of justice.

We have framed another type of citizen that we describe as the insouciant bystander, a category called 'Kanke (看客)' that is traditionally criticized in China. Insouciance here is more than disinterest, unconcern, or nonchalance. Lu Hsun (鲁迅) in his book *Call to Arms* (1960) represents Chinese people who listen to or merely observe their fellows' painful experiences, rather than take actions to help change and reform the society. Another example of the insouciant bystander is to be found in Martin Niemoller's poem 'First they came' (Niemoeller, 1946). Insouciant bystanders may be citizens holding a national status, but they do not feel solidarity with their fellows, nor are they concerned to protect human rights in practice. These bystanders have a minimalist understanding of what is entailed by citizenship (Osler and Starkey, 2005).

Within this conceptual framework, we are interested in exploring what Chinese young people's civic participation is like; what kind of citizens they are and potentially can be in the age of SNSs.

Methodology

Virtual ethnography is the main research approach of this study. This methodology originally derives from ethnography commonly used for ethnic and cultural studies. As the young generation has been increasingly involved in cyberspace, their activities and group culture can be tracked and explored in this new ethnographic field via virtual ethnographic methods (Crotty, 1998; Hine, 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Online spaces and practices mirror offline equivalents with respect to contexts, relationships, activities, understandings, and participation. Consequently much virtual ethnography mirrors traditional ethnographic approaches such as interviews (Dowling and Brown, 2010; Leander and McKim, 2003). Additionally as one of the authors is an active and skilled participant within the Renren social network space we are able to interface at the level of participant observers.

Since this study is limited in scope, we selected just one SNS, the popular Chinese social network site 'Renren' (www.renren.com) as the field. Renren is favoured by Chinese university students who use it rather like Facebook. Again, in order to limit the amount of data to be analysed, we focus on an opportunity sample of 18- to 24-year-old university students who are

active within Renren friendship networks. One author also participated within this site, using online participant observation for a period of nine months starting in early 2012. The data collected includes tracking of students' postings on their personal profiles and interactions with their networked friends in order to generate a picture of their preferences and daily behaviours on this SNS. These postings include expressions of views and forwarding previously published materials.

Having obtained permissions from four universities in Beijing, the first author conducted face-to-face interviews with 24 students and 5 teachers. The student interviewees (SIs) were 10 men and 14 women, all undergraduates and postgraduates aged between 18 and 24. Most were interviewed individually, with a minority interviewed in pairs or groups of three. Teacher interviewees (TIs) (3 men and 2 women) included students' welfare support officers (Fudaoyuan, 辅导员).

Civic issues on Renren

We identified three types of civic topic that were regularly raised by students on Renren: political and social topical issues; civic issues related to professional domains; and those embedded in everyday life.

Political and social topical issues include comments on news that had been widely reported by the media, but also ongoing topics of public interest. From the participant observation data, topics related to patriotism and social justice often triggered a high rate of viewing and sharing on Renren, as the following examples show.

When there were widespread reports throughout the media that a territorial dispute between China and other countries was threatening to escalate, several students said something about it or reprinted original news and others' opinions onto their own profile. For example, when the continuing conflict between China and Japan about the Diaoyu Islands (Fishing Islands) broke out again in early January 2011, one of the observed students published a simple personal status update titled 'Fight for Diaoyu Islands!' This was shared 307 times via Renren networks in a week. A student interviewee made the comment about such expressions of online patriotism: 'At that time, as long as you published posts, photos and videos about Japan or Diaoyu Islands, your Renren profile would get more clicks' (SI 3). In other words, taking a pro-government or patriotic stand gained attention.

Moving from international to domestic affairs, the university students observed expressed a concern for social justice through topics like wealth inequality, government corruption, abuses of power and authority, and the rights of disadvantaged groups. A photograph album regarding these problems named 'You Will Understand China Here' was circulated through Renren networks, and was also shared by many of the observed students.

The album collects photographs which present problems relating to social justice. One of the most widely viewed photographs in this album showed a Chinese family that refused to move out when their house was going to be demolished by a local authority. Although they were resisting the government, they nonetheless hoisted a national flag but accompanied it with a banner saying that 'Citizens' legal private property must not be infringed'. By the end of August 2012, this photograph had been viewed 195,443 times and shared 6,912 times on Renren. Compared with viewers who probably just had a glance at the photo, those who shared the photograph and album may be considered to be demonstrating a concern for social justice. As one student interviewee said:

> Tragedies happen every day, like citizens' homes being forcibly destroyed or rural children being killed by a terribly inferior school bus. Friends in my networks who keep sharing news probably

> want to let others know what they are caring about. I feel they also want to remind us of these tragedies. (SI 21)

For this student, the action of passing on information about an instance of injustice amounts to a call for solidarity with the victims. Although the information may be factual, by identifying and forwarding details of the incident the student opens a debate about who should take responsibility.

Not surprisingly, students are likely to be interested in those civic affairs which are in some way related to their majors. Students reported that when searching for information and discussing their course assignments on Renren they might also raise civic issues related to their areas of study. For instance, a student studying natural resources and local economics shared articles and photographs about environmental protection issues on Renren (SI 1). Students who were studying agriculture paid more attention to civic issues about the countryside, farmers, and agricultural policy, such as the development of rural economics, the reform of agricultural tax, and famers' living circumstance (SI 10, 11, and 12). Students who majored in veterinary medicine often posted and shared animal pictures on Renren in order to persuade people to protect and treat animals well (SI 8 and 9). However, a student studying computer science told us that politics and citizenship were too distant and complicated to understand (SI 6).

Civic issues that are embedded in everyday life are also commonly viewed and discussed on Renren. Most of the time students surf on Renren to express personal feelings and emotions that are of special concern to them (SI 3), to show off in the hope of becoming popular (SI 4), to complain about something negative, seek comfort and help (Teacher interviewee (TI) 2), or just to pass the time (TI 3). However, young people's civic interests can be discovered and understood from analysing aspects of their personal daily expressions. For example, by analysing users' updated personal status messages on Renren we found evidence that students sometimes include broadly political issues, as the following three students' status messages demonstrate:

> Student A: 'No voting please, we're Chinese: The government shuts down a TV show in which viewers vote for the winner!' (A sentence abstracted from an article in *The Economist.*) (23 January 2012)

> Student B: 'Well done, China! Let's support Syria. Now I'm going to have my lunch.' (06 February 2012)

> Student C: **'**Why did they cut down all the trees in front of the university library? Where will the crows live?' (A photo was attached.) (01 February 2012)

When Student A draws attention to the article published in *The Economist*, a question is implied concerning whether voting for winners of a television show plays a similar role to political voting, and whether Chinese people should be entitled to voting rights whether in entertainment or politics. Through the post of Student B a macro-level political world issue was connected with his micro-level personal life. Although he did not provide a detailed opinion, he let people know that he watched the news about Syria and that he supported the Chinese government's position. Student C was raising an environmental issue in relation to the power of the university authorities.

As well as publishing personal status updates, students also reveal their civic interests through writing diaries and uploading photographs. For instance, students who have worked as volunteers or participated in public service campaigns sometimes post their experiences and feelings on Renren and may attach a set of photographs to show their work and activities. Although showing young citizens' senses of social responsibility, the profile owners and viewers tend to regard these activities as SNS reality shows, rather than significant civic actions. One of the main aims of the posting is to use their civic participation to show off. They are hoping

to receive feedback such as: 'you dressed smartly', 'you performed very professionally', or 'your working place looks so cool' (SI 4 and 5). Nevertheless, these interactive shows still convey positive messages about participation.

The examples above demonstrate that informal civic interests are presented in a rather subtle way. Students do not necessarily make civic issues the prime focus for their posts, but they may nonetheless reveal the issues with which they are concerned.

Reasons for participation

Students' online attention to civic issues significantly depended on their offline interests. Those who were already keen on political and social topics tended to participate more in online civic activities.

Some of the observed students who worked for the Students' Union (SU) or for a student society displayed a relatively high level of SNS civic participation. Since the SU and student societies regularly organize activities, they may encourage online participation, such as voting for the ten most outstanding teachers. Other campaigns where members shared relevant information on their Renren profiles for publicity included boycotting unsafe foods and running a campus market for charity. Although there are many opportunities offered online, we were informed that students 'usually only view and take part in activities launched by their own societies or by their friends' (SI 2).

We identified gender differences from our sample. Men were more likely to be involved in online civic discussions than women. Our male informants asserted: 'That is a men's game!', 'We boys love to view and have a kind of SNS discussion on diverse public topics, like politics and military affairs' (SI 13 and 14). On the other hand, women students felt uneasy in engaging with, 'so-called citizenship, which consists of a set of big and vague topics which men always talk about'(SI 17). Girls' sustained interests on SNSs were more grounded in aspects of their personal lives, such as food, beauty, shopping, and fashion (SI 18 and 19). However, this gender difference was not absolute or constant.

When students received information concerning public affairs on Renren they would scan the headings to see if the new feeds met their personal needs or related to their rights. Only then would they click to view the information or follow the link and thread.

Our research suggests that one of the most important needs for students is to become the centre of attention. This is achieved by establishing a frequent online presence. In fact by denouncing the Party or the government, they can easily gain a reputation as so-called brave and critical opinion leaders followed by hundreds of fans (SI 4 and SI 12). Such contributors form an opposite group within Renren to those mentioned earlier who strongly advocate government actions and policies. This does create a sense of debate, even if the motivation is more personal than political.

Another aspect of civic participation observed on Renren is the struggle for personal rights. For instance, when a student photographer's photographs were used for university publicity without his agreement, he published a personal status message to complain that his copyright had been totally ignored by university administrators and to call for his name to be shown on the photographs. The wide circulation of his status message was noticed by the university administrators who finally acknowledged his copyright.

A sense of political efficacy may also influence civic participation. This means that if people feel that their participatory actions can affect political decision-making and help to solve problems, they may be inspired to continue participating (TI 3). However, in many cases students choose a path of non-participation because they still feel 'speechless' when referring to political

and social issues, both online and offline. They have few opportunities to live as 'a real citizen' or 'a political person', so they lack direct experience of civic participatory strategies like presenting, demonstrating, and negotiating (SI 22 and TI 2). This suggests that students would benefit from training to develop a sense of political efficacy.

Forms of civic participation via social networking

In terms of civic issues, the majority of youth who we observed and interviewed preferred to act as lurkers. Lurkers read posts and view discussions, but do not participate. A more visible interaction is to click 'like it' or share civic contents with others. Lurking and sharing may nonetheless imply invisible and silent support. The more times a topic is viewed and shared by users, the greater are the possibilities for it to be seen by others, since a higher click rate raises the visibility of the topic. During the observation process, a video was posted called *Travel Through Hundreds of Chinese Universities in 260 Seconds*. It aimed to raise money for children who have brittle bone disease (*osteogenesis imperfecta*, referred to as OI). It attracted university students' attention because many wanted to see if their own universities appeared in the video. When they understood the intention of the video, many felt this was a significant issue to be shared with their peers for fun as well as for helping children with OI. By 31 August 2012, it had been viewed 381,462 times and shared 37,534 times among Renren networks. In this case, viewing and sharing do represent a kind of positive participatory action.

However, sharing sometimes also means disagreement or non-support. When students disagree with something on Renren, they may share it but add their own comments (SI 21 and 22). This explicit expression of opinion becomes a starting point for wider civic discussion.

Some interviewees found that discussions and debates on SNSs rarely progressed beyond expressions of agreement or disagreement. Some post civic-related content on their Renren profiles, which can attract their friends and friends' friends to engage in a dialogue, but it may be difficult to keep within the parameters of rational discourse and critical thinking. As one student put it: 'too many people do not really want to listen to your opinion'. Instead, 'they only give vent to their anger via swearing online' (SI 22).

One of the student interviewees mentioned how he once organized an online discussion group on Renren. He invited networked students to research and discuss reform in the Chinese educational and medical system. But he found that a number of students tended to 'insist on their own opinions, paying no attention to evidence and only believing what has been planted in their minds' (SI 21). A more disappointing thing for him was that he was abused by some participants when he put forward opinions different from theirs. He said regretfully: 'Finally, I couldn't bear someone's dirty nonsense. So I had to shut down my Renren discussion group' (SI 21).

In the wider online community there is experience of how to deal with abuse and so-called 'flaming', particularly by introducing simple procedural rules known as 'netiquette'. These may not be easy to enforce, but it would appear that an introduction to netiquette would be a useful element of any training for online debate and discussion.

Results of online participation

Although SNSs provide a vast amount of updated information and enable young people to be informed citizens, there is still a gap between online participation and offline participation. For our sample students, this cyber–civic participation gap has three aspects.

First, students regard themselves as more intelligent and knowledgeable because of their access to information today, but they have difficulty determining what can be trusted, especially when opinions are merely asserted rather than discussed. A student said:

> … as so much information is available, we will not easily be cheated. Facts provided by schools, teachers and government can be easily checked online and verified with our friends. (SI 6)

But as a public event is accompanied by a variety of media reports and their SNS friends tend to interpret it from various perspectives, it is still difficult for them to make a choice:

> I'm always confused … I don't know whose voice to believe. So I don't know on which side I should stand. (SI 23)

Although multiple sources of information and interactions among network friends provide young people with the opportunity for critical thinking, their political literacy is often underdeveloped and they may simply adopt a reflex of negative criticism.

Second, while the students in our study supported the principle of information control in China, they felt that the strict internet control restricted their participation. They felt that too many people online 'disseminate false information', 'spread vicious rumours', and 'preach Western ideology', which may 'mislead the public' (SI 2, 3, 8, and 9). 'When a real intense social conflict occurs, those unauthentic and seditious words quickly spread by SNSs probably make it worse and worse, [and] even disturb social stability' (SI 22). These students clearly believe what they have learnt about the relationship between the control of information and social stability. As a student pointed out:

> In terms of public events, when some important facts are invisible, we are unable to make a wise judgement. When someone's opinions are prohibited, we will never know whether he is right or wrong. So we finally lose our interests in those unknown things. (SI 22)

Since students have few chances to know the whole context of many social events, they are frequently confused by complicated and unfamiliar civic issues. They tend to keep a distance from sensitive issues rather than engaging online, let alone offline.

Third, students feel that they are powerful online, but helpless offline. Although there is internet censorship, students can still find ways to avoid it. For example, they replace banned words with abbreviations, codes, or images, and they download and save sensitive contents immediately and then share with their Renren friends. By using these approaches, they can discuss a wide range of civic topics online (SI 3, 6, and 13) while offline channels for open expression are still few. A student said:

> I feel it is more difficult with offline civic participation … I could be a public opinion leader in my virtual community, but I'm still nobody in the reality. (SI 22).

For many students, offline civic participations may be more complex and challenging. They prefer talk online rather than action offline. Hence online forums represent a significant space for developing more open forms of democracy.

Active citizens, good citizens, and insouciant bystanders

Our sample students on SNSs behaved more like good citizens and insouciant bystanders than like active citizens. We will explore some of the reasons for this in this section.

Culture citizenship and lifestyle politics

In classical Habermasian theories, the term 'public sphere' implies a universal space where citizens engage in the political process via full discussion and critical–rational deliberation (Habermas, 1996). Yet the public sphere is not necessarily confined to formal politics, nor does civic participation always have to be solemn and serious. This has been theorized from a post-Habermasian perspective as a 'cultural public sphere' (McGuigan, 2005: 427) that allows people to construct citizenship in their everyday lives and interactions with popular culture (Hermes, 2005). In this case, not only formal political activities but also daily practices like reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing may be construed as civic participation.

Our evidence suggests that SNSs have become deeply embedded in university students' everyday lives. The SNS culture is part of their popular culture. It has the capacity to trigger their civic interests via issues shared by their peers. However, since the SNS culture is part of entertainment, young people express their civic attitudes in many informal ways, such as by publishing a personal status, uploading a photograph, or just posting a joke on their SNS profiles. In this way students bond and build new communities built on cultural citizenship (Burgess *et al*., 2006; Hermes, 2005). This evolution was not planned but rather gradually emerged as a youth sub-culture, which might even have the power to contest traditional formal political and social systems. Indeed, lifestyle politics may start from tiny individual struggles but eventually lead to new forms of democratic politics (Giddens, 1991).

Cultural citizenship and lifestyle politics emphasize a set of individualized issues like environmental quality, personal rights, and consumer politics (Inglehart, 1997; Bennett *et al*., 2009). The discussion of these topics on Renren has already contributed to Chinese young people's civic awareness, which is an important part of civic learning. However, without new forms of political literacy, involving the skills to interrogate official discourses, students will struggle to make their own independent judgements (SI 22 and 23). Young people need guidance and training in recognizing who can be trusted, what information is reliable, and which values and lifestyles are appropriate, whether in online or offline settings.

Strategies against the 'Spiral of Silence'

When internet users participate online, they are exposed to a vast range of opinions. However, collective behaviour often leads to some opinions being amplified, while voices of other groups become weaker in what has been called a 'Spiral of Silence' (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). This presents a challenge to the theory of the ideal public sphere where everyone's voice can be heard.

Some of our interviewees reported that they prefer to lurk rather than speak out because it is much easier and safer to observe others' conversations online than be observed by others. As observers or bystanders, young students just need to click on the mouse and nod to agree with someone's sophisticated argument or laugh at someone's stupid opinions. Most of the time they are confident in their own opinions but are wary of too much sharing. Their statements included: 'I know what I support. That's enough!'; 'I don't need [to] share my ideas with others. Otherwise, I will be judged or criticized by others'; 'I only speak if I have to do so, for example, my friend particularly asks me personally'; 'It would be very dangerous when you say something different from others or make others angry. You will probably be the target of a manhunt where your network friends may expose all your privacies online and ask people to abuse you' (SI 3, 4, 7, and 9). Clearly there are dangers in expressing a minority view, even in the virtual SNS space.

To speak out in public needs courage and a set of strategies, especially when facing the dominant opinions of the crowd. But the 'Spiral of Silence' in SNSs may result in young people

losing their courage and retreating back to the status of insouciant bystanders who prefer to look on with folded arms rather than to be actively engaged. This too is an issue for citizenship education in the online age.

Internet censorship and rights to freedom

When discussing civic participation in the Chinese context, questions relating to internet censorship are inevitable. It is widely reported worldwide that the Chinese government takes extensive measures to monitor and control citizens' use of the internet, such as filtering information, blocking sections of foreign websites such as Facebook and YouTube, and prohibiting words or phrases deemed to be sensitive from being published online (James, 2009). Many previous criticisms focus upon restrictions of human rights through this type of internet censorship. Until recently little attention has been paid to understanding this problem from the perspectives and practices of Chinese students, especially as the Chinese internet has been developing rapidly over the past few years.

The university students and teachers who participated in our research admit that internet censorship influences their SNS civic participation. The situations that are cited most frequently as annoying include not being allowed to search for and publish certain information; content shared with friends disappearing; and contributions deleted by moderators on the sites for being too radical. Although students understand that all these bans relate to content that is perceived to be violating the laws and regulations of the state, they still expect and strive for more freedom and rights in creative ways. Tactics revealed to us include using a code or pseudonym instead of a banned word, expressing and commenting on sensitive events with humour and irony, and getting access to Facebook and YouTube by using special software called 'over the wall' ('翻墙'软件) and forwarding some posts to Renren. These actions are a form of active citizenship by which students use creative skills of problem-solving in order to secure rights and freedoms. However, this leads to further questions: whether struggling for freedom trumps respecting the laws in youth SNS civic participation; where the boundary or bottom line of online civic participation lies; and how to deal with other invisible controls besides the control from the government (TI 3, 4, and 5). Such questions need further discussion and clarification among young people and their teachers.

Conclusion: The potential of citizenship education

To sum up, our sample of students' civic participation shows that they are engaged in many online civic activities with multiple motivations and strategies. They can speak out online to assert their rights and to show their sense of responsibility to wider society. We have identified some characteristics of their cyber-civic participation. First, students focus more on cultural citizenship and lifestyle politics rather than on traditional formal citizenship in which elections, parties, service organizations, and public debates are recognized as being core elements. Second, students often lack public communication and negotiation skills, especially in terms of controversial topics. The act of lurking and the influence of the 'Spiral of Silence' may make them feel speechless and helpless. Finally, students find it difficult to transfer online performance into real, offline citizenship practices. It appears that their online participation has a limited influence on their engagement with active citizenship.

Thus, the Chinese university students we studied are more like insouciant bystanders or good citizens. The former tend to lurk online without specific civic interests and attitudes, while the latter participate as patriotic and loyal supporters of the status quo. Although some of

their creative acts, such as responses to internet censorship, show a potential for more active participation, they need training and education to develop their civic engagement.

We argue that the social network sites contribute to youth informal civic participation. However, these sites do not directly lead to an ideal public sphere which promotes citizenship literacy. Indeed, ironically the internet may promote participation, but undermine the civic in the sense that the internet also encourages individualization, or at least a fragmentation of social and political debate (Bennett *et al.*, 2006). Active civic participation is more than simply acquiring information (Livingstone *et al.*, 2005). In other words, although the internet and SNSs have the capacity to be a significant vehicle for changing Chinese democratic citizenship, the extent of change depends on how young people actually engage in real civic actions.

Attempts to move from a paradigm of education that promotes *good* citizens to one that values *active* citizens may meet resistance. However, insouciant bystanders are unlikely to meet the challenge of the accelerating economic and social transformations of Chinese society. We conclude that there is significant potential for citizenship education in universities. Students could benefit from opportunities to consider the implications of digital citizenship learning, as well as from practical opportunities to reflectively engage in civic participation (Bennett *et al.*, 2009). A formal or informal learning programme might cover knowledge about democratic citizenship, digital media, and the public sphere. It could include skills of expression, communication, negotiation, compromise, cooperation, and activity organization, as well as promoting democratic civic values.

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