

# **New Directions for Education in China**

# **DEDICATION**

The editors and authors dedicate this book to those in China who are working to make education a rich and rewarding experience for all students and teachers.

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## **Chapter nine**

### **Networked young citizens and citizenship education in the digital age: A virtual ethnographic research into Chinese university students' civic learning via cyber civic participation**

**Ke Lin and Hugh Starkey**

#### **Starting points for researching networked young citizens**

When one plans to undertake research in the field of education, before raising the research questions and designing one's research proposal, it is always necessary to ask the basic questions of: what do we mean by education?; who are the objects and subjects of education? We ask what the aims, contents and forms of different kinds of education are. In the current Chinese context, because of the rapid, expanded and deep changes that have been happening in all aspects of education, questions such as these are no longer capable of being answered as simply as before, especially in the sense that the equation of education = schooling which takes students as objects, requiring them to take courses, to listen to teachers' instructions, to finish homework, to pass examinations, and then, to find a job in the labour market, is itself undergoing critical re-evaluation. From the perspective adopted in this chapter we argue that one of the new directions for education is to encourage young people to embrace new technologies so that they can embrace self-driven learning and thereby exert a positive influence within the social spheres that they inhabit locally, nationally and indeed globally. In other words, education in such an internet age and information society aims to not only drill skilled individuals in preparation for them to play a functional role in society but also cultivate

their capacities to become and to act as responsible citizens. This stance provides the starting point for our research.

We consider a broad and theorised understanding of young people to be an elementary principle for any educational research focusing on this group in society. Therefore, we locate the present study in the daily practices and culture of youth. Our thinking is informed by two emerging perspectives concerning youth culture and identity. The first of these is the notion of young people as the ‘digital/internet generation’ (Buckingham and Willett, 2006) and secondly of young people as ‘present growing citizens’ instead of future citizens (Osler and Starkey, 2005). A phenomenon of considerable interest, which has been emerging simultaneously in many countries, is that networked young citizens are using the internet to actively participate in public affairs, transforming traditional and institutional democracy as represented by voting, governing, demonstrating and protesting. Instead of these traditional forms of public activism young people are creating new forms of civic engagement represented by online civic discussion, online assembling, online petitioning and boycotting (Banaji and Buckingham, 2010; Bennett, 2008; Loader, Vromen, and Xenos, 2014). The combination of internet use and civic engagement among young people is also being noticed by Chinese scholars who have begun to draw a picture that Chinese young citizens online are gradually influencing the social, political and educational atmosphere in this country (Dong and Han, 2008; Fang, 2011; Ye and Xie, 2002). The approaches towards civic engagement have become increasingly diverse, ranging from political and social discussion via the Chinese micro-blogging service Weibo, such as the case of the 2011 protests in Wukan against local corruption, land seizures and police abuses of power and the high-speed train crash near Wenzhou, to entertainment-based engagement through voting, such as the popular reality TV show *The Super Girl*, a singing contest for female performers (Bondes and Schucher, 2014; Tong and Zuo, 2014; Wu, 2014). These highly significant changes have been the stimulus for our research interests. We have

conducted an empirical study focusing on Chinese young people's cyber civic participation as an approach to civic learning. Our purpose has been to interpret data cross-culturally, which contains both traditional and emerging perspectives, as well as views framed by the Chinese and international experience. This cross-cultural research design reflects the authors' backgrounds: Ke Lin was born in China in the period of the most rapid internet development. She has become experienced in observing and explaining online civic interaction among young people; while Hugh Starkey has specialised in citizenship and human rights education for many years within British and European contexts.

Research such as this serves not only the interest of the authors' academic interests but can also contribute towards discussions about the direction being taken within Chinese educational reform. The education system in China is undergoing a new period of transformation since the promulgation in 2010 of the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development*. Among a variety of educational goals, two aspects are of particular relevance for the present study: firstly, the call by the government to nurture capable users of information technology; secondly, the expressed desire to cultivate qualified socialist citizens (Ministry of Education of the People Republic of China (MOEPRC), 2010). Both of these contain a number of distinct challenges for the Chinese context. The former implies a shift of learning from teacher-centred modes towards student-centred modes that 'encourage students make use of information technology as a means for study in order to become more capable of analysing and solving problems' (p.41). The latter refers to more complex activities that promote socialist concepts of unity and mutual assistance, honesty, trust, discipline, being law-abiding and hard-working. There is also mention of a stepping up of 'education about citizenship and establishing socialist concepts of democracy, the rule of law, freedom, equality, equity and justice for the students'(p.10). While examining these policy goals, we can see there are conflicts and interactions between adult and youth lifestyles, traditional and contemporary

cultures, national and international values. Of course such polarities conceal much more complex interrelations such as the prevalence within internet forums of concerns relating to local, regional and provincial identities. Therefore, our research design crosses social polarities of the type cited above, exploring young people's use of internet for citizenship purposes, would reveal much more interesting conflicts and interactions. Unless educational policymakers, teachers, parents and students themselves understand these conflicts and challenges, fulfilling these educational goals will prove challenging. Elaborating and pronouncing the policy is one thing but finding ways of realising it requires extensive and detailed research. This is another reason why we conduct this research.

We hope that the research approach adopted here may act as a stepping off point for others who are interested in investigating studies into online participation by youth groups. We focus on virtual ethnography, a recently developing methodology that is appropriate for describing and interpreting what is happening in the online community. We present basic principles of virtual ethnography and hope the empirical focus for the chapter offers concrete examples of the possibilities within this approach.

### **Virtual ethnography: developing a methodology to suit the times**

Young people's online civic engagement has become a popular theme in the interface between new media literacy and citizenship education. Different research approaches have been adopted to examine the varying dimensions of this theme. Here we have considered three such approaches, beginning with a quantitative research mode often referred to as content analysis. In this case the aim is to discover what kinds of information and resource websites provide in supporting youth online civic participation. Using this approach helps a researcher to select, categorise, code and analyse a vast number of websites. It can, for example, summarise the most popular social and political topics among



their users and identify the strategies that websites use for encouraging civic discussions (Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee and Philippi, 2008; Gerodimos, 2008). A second approach arises if research projects seek to understand in detail and depth how young people think and act when they take part in online civic campaigns. Here, use is made of qualitative instruments such as face-to-face interviews, focus group exchanges, structured observations and case studies. These methods provide different channels for gathering various types of data (Bers, 2008; Coleman and Rowe, 2005). A third approach characterises projects that aim to explore and address more complex issues, or that seek to compare different groups of young people, or to construct patterns of youth online engagement. Here, there is use of mixed methods adopting more than one style of investigation, combining questionnaire surveys, case studies, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (Banaji and Buckingham, 2010; Livingstone, Bober and Helsper, 2005) and examining examples of online practice.

Previous research concerning youth online civic participation has already provided a range of possible and accessible research methods, which can help potential researchers' further study in this expanding and exciting field. However, designing research typically starts with real-life issues that need to be addressed, answered and solved. The first rule for the intending researcher is to select a methodology that suits the purposes of the research questions.

Since the main purpose of our research is to discover and describe young citizens' daily experiences and behaviours online, we have to consider an approach which can identify and gain access to first-hand data and living examples. Our research takes 18-24-year-old Chinese university students as a sample group and attempts to explore how they employ Web 2.0 applications for their cyber civic participation. This research question is followed by five sub-questions presented as following:

- What are the civic issues that concern them most?
- In what ways do they participate in civic activities?
- What are the factors that affect their civic participation?

- What impact did they feel their participation had achieved?
- What are the educational implications of this type of students' civic participation?

When designing this research, we defined 'cyber civic participation' as public discussion and activities on the internet and via the internet, related to political and social domains. The word 'civic' implies notions of the public sphere (Habermas, [1962]1989), which promote not only individual freedom of association and freedom of expression, but also citizens' capacities to work together for a common aim and citizens' community involvement (Bennett, 2008; Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 1998). We have delimited the range of cyber space within Web 2.0 applications, which is characterised by internet-based participation and interaction between and within user groups, such as wikis, online forums, blogging, podcasting and social networking (Kolesinski, Nelson-Weaver and Diamond, 2014). If online settings are regarded as being one of young people's living spaces and Web 2.0 as a new social fabric consisting of mutually constructing communities, we may be able to observe dynamic interactions among young people within these spaces and communities. Young citizens' discussions and activities on and via Web 2.0 can be recorded and analysed in detail.

Therefore, we pursue 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000) as our main methodology, choosing interpretivism as a methodological stance which aims to explain why and how young people operate in the manner that they do and to illustrate the social and cultural significance of its context (McGregor and Murnane, 2010; Rabinow and Sullivan, 1979). Applying research methods of online participant observation and offline in-depth interviews, we collect and share stories which emanate from events in the field that constitutes the youth cyber community. We access information about their interests, strategies, attitudes and about the influence that their civic participation has.

## **Virtual ethnography: a broadened and reformulated ethnography**

What is virtual ethnography? At first ethnography originally derived from Western anthropology and anthropological theory. It was initially used in an attempt to reveal a distinctive way of everyday life, and the beliefs and values integral to it, belonging to a group of people or a society (Crotty, 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Thus, it has been widely adapted for ethnic and cultural studies (Clifford, 1992; Gray, 2003) to assist in understanding a group of people's actions, thoughts and customs, and interpret relationships, communications and interactions among them, or with other groups. Ethnography has been used as a label to describe various meanings and approaches during its complex history, not just within anthropology but also within sociology, psychology, economics and political studies. In educational fields, scholars commonly use ethnographic approaches to investigate the culture or sub-culture of children and adolescents in a particular age range or in certain sites, like schools or classrooms. For our research, we set our target group as 18-24-year-old Chinese university students, one of the most vibrant groups who are creating diverse and trending cultures in China. But sites through which they learn and live are no longer restricted to a campus or a workplace where the researcher can be physically present as an observant participant.

Traditionally, ethnography has usually been framed by geographic boundaries, involving researchers focusing upon communities within identifiable physical locations, mapping and understanding the practices within these locations, and then retreating to other spaces in order to write research reports (Clifford, 1992). With the development of digital technology, the internet has created a virtual world for people to occupy and populate, especially for the so called digital/internet generation. When young people currently announce that they do not just use the internet but live on the internet, a new ethnographic field comes into being which

challenges traditional geo-spatial approaches within ethnographic practice (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Hine, 2000; Markham, 1998). When we spoke with our research participants, we heard that all felt a need to go online every day, for diverse purposes, such as information collecting, news browsing, group working for their courses, shopping, watching a movie and/or television and chatting with family and friends. Often these were being done simultaneously with users switching from one mode to another and back again. One of the students showed his default online signature to us which was visible for his friends in different internet sites:

I'm 24 hours online. You are welcome to bother me! If you want to talk, do send me a message; if you don't want to talk, just poke me online

(Student interviewee 22)

In this context, the time and place of conversation has changed, so have the ways in which conversations and interactions take place. However, the virtual world cannot be detached from the material/physical spatial world, which permits for a transference of the main principles of ethnographic inquiry to also be suitable for ethnographers of the virtual world.

As people's living space and sites for social research have expanded into the virtual worlds of the internet, there is a need to develop a virtual ethnography that is attuned to the particularities of the evolving cyber space, adapting approaches to the communities being studied and to the sub-cultures created through computer-mediated and internet-related social interaction. Leander and McKim (2003) address three issues for consideration for virtual ethnographers including place, knowledge about identities and participant observation. Each of these issues presents distinct challenges of a practical and ethical nature. This has implications both for practical research strategies and for research ethics. The origin of this methodology and its applications in our research are presented in Table 9.1.

**Table 9.1:** A brief review of virtual ethnography

Please insert Table 9.1 here.

**Expanding places for fieldwork**

Place is one of three essential elements of the social context of ethnographic research. The other two are actors and activities (Spradley, 1980). Any physical place can be the site for a social situation as long as the other two elements are present at the same time. This kind of place can also be regarded as a field for ethnographic research because human interaction and culture happens when particular actors do particular activities in a particular place (Leander and McKim, 2003). A key methodological tool lies with structured observation or recoding of what takes place. With respect to the cyber setting and location, there are also three elements: place - cyberspace, actors - internet users, and activities - various online conversations and activities. Together these construct interactive ethnographic fields, which will be continuously expanded because of the capacity of internet technology to multiply and fragment. Additionally, cyber-related innovations have become embedded into the social life of a generation. The design of this research considered these three elements so our fieldwork was based on two types of cyberspace: online forum (OF) and social network sites (SNSs), where we observed students as internet users. In order to investigate their online activities in relation to civic participation, our focus was upon political and social topical discussions and activities among young people.

**Diverse identity recognition of participants**

Since the internet is a virtual space, identifying participants becomes a challenge for ethnographic researchers. Identity play exists widely in the online setting and anonymity might influence the reliability of the research data. Identity play is when a participant adopts a pseudonymous name and persona thus disguising who they are while engaging in the cyberspace. We should only believe the authenticity of identity when we can verify it through the process of interaction (Paccagnella, 1997). Identity play can also be accepted because online identities also could be consistent with those which participants sustain offline. Hine (2000) argues that the identity can be plausible through the process of documenting interactions within information and analysing the threads of evidence in offline lives. Another way to deal with the authenticity issue is to vary meanings of identity, regarding identity as ‘the possibility of projecting or casting one’s life within different existential possibilities’, instead of sticking to ‘body’ or ‘substance’ (Capurro and Pingel, 2002, p. 193). For example, we not only focused on participants who have direct connections with us offline and formally consented to join our research, in order to trace their online life stories; but also we paid attention to those anonymous or pseudonymous participants who had no direct connection with us but who can be observed in public online settings interacting with so called net citizens. In other words, participants’ online identities maybe consist with their real names and different pseudonyms.

For online research, identity anonymity and identity play might bring difficulties to information categorising and data confirmation. So there is a very important principle of virtual ethnography - the need for reflection (Jones, 1999), which requires critically thinking when observing the web texts, the producers and the audience of the internet. To minimize the bias caused by identity play, we particularly located our fieldwork in those websites that aim to serve our target user groups or those that encourage real name registration. Moreover, through a long-term interaction with young people online and a repeated verification of source and

information quality, we were able to confirm participants' identities more reliably. For instance, sometimes young people may use several different network names to participate in one topical civic discussion, trying to create an illusion that particular opinions look stronger and receive more support than others. Unless researchers kept observing a thread of forum posts and checked every network name with its network UID that is a unique identifier for a specific user of a website, we might have failed to notice that some posts were probably published by one person using different names but belonging to the same UID. Although this kind of identity play makes the research process more complex, it should be regarded as an interesting strategy used by young people for civic participation, especially for discussing controversial issues.

### **Challenges of participant observation**

Ethnographic methodology requires the researcher to engage in the community, to observe and record everything in the settings including activities, people and physical aspects (Spradley, 1980). In terms of participant observation in the virtual world, an intending researcher must gain access to various online spaces and frequently take part in online communication in person, especially within the environment of Web 2.0. Only if the researcher is engaged in such kind of widespread social network relationship, can she gather and share information, express and exchange opinions like ordinary users, and then gradually get to know people operating within the youth online community and its culture.

There are two factors that may challenge virtual participant observation: one is the existence of 'lurkers' (网络潜水族); the other is the role of 'researchers'. Firstly, there are a host of lurkers, who just read but do not post online. It would be very difficult to observe the actions and activities of lurkers because they are invisible, silent and leave few observable

traces. Thus, here arises a question: should lurkers be considered as participants or non-participants? On the one hand, they certainly exist and make contributions to cyberspace. For example, when the first author once observed an online topical post on a students' forum, the post had received over 300 hits, though only 20 visible participants expressed their viewpoints. This implies that there were a considerably large number of lurkers who had read and cared about the post, but did not give active responses. Non-participation can be considered sometimes as a political act, just as participation in formally non-political activities can sometimes be politically significant (Coleman and Rowe, 2005). Lurkers' non-participation or passive participation may also contain political and civic attitudes, like uninterested in or unsatisfied with a certain topic. However, the anonymity leads to the difficulty of recognizing the identity of lurkers, so that we could not observe everything in virtual ethnographic field.

Second, the double role of a researcher using participant observation results in a dilemma, or even a failed observation. The researcher's identity as a lurker or as a visible participant may affect the dynamics. For example, when the first researcher once observed an online forum of a university, before obtaining the approval from the administrator, she could only use the guest identity which only permitted her to read a part of students' posts, but not to achieve full engagement in the students' topics. However, when the researcher disclosed her real identity to several participants, two of students slightly edited their previous posts with some words changed and deleted; others stopped posting during following three days.

In order to avoid the dilemmas above of participant observation, we have adjusted our research approaches in two ways: firstly, we understand authenticity of identity as negotiated and sustained by the situation rather than as a fixed identity attached to a fixed body. So we trace more opinions or actions which are frequently presented by different users, instead of an individual user. Second, we would not announce our statuses as researchers when undertaking participant observation unless it was necessary, because if we unmasked our statuses and our



participants knew that they were being observed, the reliability of observation would likely be influenced. Nevertheless, we strictly respected participants' privacy and would not release any personal information or publish any personal narrative that could help identify participants without agreement.

### **Conducting a virtual ethnographic study: research methods and examples of youth cyber civic participation**

There are three main methods utilized in our research. For the purposes of interactivity in virtual ethnographic study, participant observation is the principal method. We expect to make a thick description, which means seeking to capture as much data as possible of the context of any particular action (Dowling and Brown, 2010; Geertz, 1973). Also, we carried out both unstructured and semi-structured in-depth interviews, because it was necessary to see things from the perspective of the participants. At the same time, we also continued our literature analysis to clarify and conceptualise theoretical assumptions, because 'foreshadowed problems' are closely related and revealed to the observer through theoretical studies (Hine 2000, p.9). Therefore, our research includes the integration of both first-hand empirical investigation methods and the theoretical and comparative interpretations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In the following section, we will present how we put these research methods into practice and provide relevant examples.

#### **Online Participant Observation (OPO)**

Online Participant Observation (OPO) is one of the most fundamental methods to virtual ethnography. Borrowing some strategies from media research and field ethnography, OPO includes the observation and analysis from three aspects: producers, audience and productions (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor, 2012). Since Web 2.0 media break the strict boundaries between producers and audience, internet users play dual roles of audience and producer and make nearly of the all products, such as information, knowledge, opinions, and activities, which can be shared with one another via websites. In other words, websites have become an enriched ethnographic field where the data of places, actors and activities can be collected simultaneously. Since November 2011, we carried out a nine month OPO taking field notes and analysing data.

Instead of observing a vast number of websites, the researchers focused on two categories of websites: online forums (OF) and social network site (SNS). At the early stage, we selected four case sites as key observation fields (see table 9.2), which were reported as being the most influential or most representative websites among interviewed students. Later, we also paid attention to hot topics and events on a few sites which were mentioned by our interviewees, such as Kaixin, QQ-Zone, Baidu Tieba and Weixin, but did not conduct a long-term intensive OPO.

**Table 9.2:** The categories and features of my observation websites

Please insert Table 9.2 here.

By using OPO, we mainly explore the first two sub-questions:

- what civic issues concern students most;
- in what ways they participate in civic discussion and activities.

The researcher logged into these Web 2.0 sites every day during the observation period, keeping an eye on each day's popular and topical posts, which can be found in the 'Top-10 Hot Topic Rankings' on OFs and 'New Feeds Page' on SNSs. Observed topics cover not only daily life issues, but also specific political, social and cultural issues.

The main tasks of observation included:

- to collect the multimodal texts from students cyber civic activities, including text, images, photos, audios and videos posted on the forums and social networks media;
- to count those topics and contents which students viewed and replied to most frequently;
- to observe how they gathered information, expressed their opinions, started discussions and debates, and connected online topics with offline activities
- to observe how they expressed agreements and disagreements, making negotiations and decisions.

Four sets of examples selected below show a concrete process of how we collected and analysed observation data.

### **Youth volunteering as a popular topic on a top-down forum**

Volunteering work is usually regarded, in many states and in China, as an important civic activity which demonstrates young people's sense of social responsibility and also helps in the socialisation of youth. On China Youth Forum (CYF), volunteering is one of the most viewed and discussed civic issues. A sub-forum named 'Volunteers' Communication' ranks 3rd out of 10 top sub-forums of CYF, which contained 20,521 original posts along with 136,211 comments in total by the end of our observation. Among all posts from the whole forum, volunteering topical threads get higher clicking rates than others. For example, the post titled 'Leave a word to your volunteering organisation where you once worked' wins the champion of viewed posts (228,238 views) and the third-place of responded posts (989 comments).

Volunteering topical threads on CYF mainly focus on three aspects: policy explanation, seeking information and sharing experience. The first type of topic is often related to two national volunteering projects, which are widely broadcasted on CYF: 'The West Volunteering Plan (WVP)' and 'University Graduates as Village Officials (UGVO)'. WVP aims to recruit young volunteers to make contributions to the development of agriculture, education and medical services in Western China; while UGVO encourages university graduates to voluntarily engage in governance in rural areas all over the country. Both were launched by the Chinese central government and supported by local governments, universities and youth organisations. To stimulate students' applications for these projects, many posts explained the relevant policies, such as requirements for recruiting volunteers, the mechanisms for volunteering, benefits for volunteer teachers after their working, and the payment and promotion system for village officials. There are also posts particularly collecting frequently-asked questions along with answers, providing basic information and updated notifications about projects. Secondly, apart from national projects, a great deal of information about volunteer works is released onto CYF by university representatives, NGO organisations and individuals. For instance, some posts recruit volunteer teachers to help rural migrant workers'

children in urban schools; others call for volunteer nurses to look after old people. Thirdly, in terms of experience sharing, it seems that users who had or will have volunteering opportunities in national projects like to announce their success in getting such great honours. And students who want to join volunteering works also post on CYF to ask for further information.

Although the majority of posts present positive information and descriptions about volunteering on CYF, a few negative comments and points of advice exist. Some forum participants complain about the low payment and unfair treatment of volunteer teachers. Others expose bureaucracy in the teams of village officials. A small number of points of advice or wishes have also been expressed online, such as cooperation with enterprises for increasing volunteer's pay and provision of more non-government-led volunteering opportunities.

### **Lifestyle political discussion through a bottom-up forum**

Oiegg is a bottom-up online forum built and managed by university students. The majority of participants are current students, alumni and teachers from University B and other universities. Thus, topical discussions on Oiegg forum focus more on university life which gain a visibly higher level of participation. Its most important feature is spontaneous community-based interaction. This means that the university with its surroundings has existed online as a community, where students get together to discuss and deal with affairs in terms of their virtual and real lives. When it comes to civic participation, it can naturally display what university students care about and how they communicate and take actions within or beyond their peer groups.

The popular posts on Oiegg usually present students' attitude towards their study and life in the campus. For instance, there are a number of poll designed and published by forum users which are discuss their most or least favourite courses, teachers, administrative

departments, social activities, restaurants, support team staffs, and so forth. Students are keen on viewing and responding this type of poll posts. There is an interesting example that students select for the worst university services via a poll post (See table 9.3).

**Table 9.3:** A posted poll about university services on Oiegg

Please insert Table 9.3 here.

The 235 ballots, after a series of compliments and complaints, demonstrate that students, as members of university community and consumer of university services, do care and join in voting or polling about issues closely related to their lived world. They are also willing to list more detailed reasons about their voting, along with direct critiques, or humorous ironies, or deliberative advices. Their participation in daily community affairs could be related to 'lifestyle politics' (Giddens, 1991, 1994), which may ferment changes for their community via daily actions, such as consumption or the pursuing for individual benefits.

### **Social justice as a popular topic on Renren**

University students whom we observed on Renren expressed their concerns for social justice through topics like wealth inequality, government corruption, abuses of power and authority and the rights of disadvantaged groups. A photo album named 'You Will Understand China Here' regarding these problems 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 that a Chinese family 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 by a banner saying ‘Citizens’ legal private property must not be infringed’. By the end of August 2012, this photo had been viewed 195,443 times and shared 6,912 times on Renren. Compared with viewers who probably just glanced at the photograph, those who shared the photograph and album may be considered to be demonstrating a concern for a social justice issue.

### **National and global issues stimulating civic awareness on Weibo**

Sina Weibo has been the largest and the most influential SNS platform for public discussion so far. The topics discussed on Weibo are extremely wide. Many participants of our research report they have Weibo accounts and enjoy the interaction on this micro-blog. Since Weibo applications have been successfully connected with mobile phone devices, it is easier for students to get access everywhere with mobile networks and WiFi at any time. One of the most important finds of our research is young people also have exposure to global issues through their Weibo engagement. They get to know what happens in the world every day and exchange their opinions through the micro-post discussions. They also have the opportunity to understand other countries via online or offline international cooperative programmes.

The international hot topics reported by traditional media (TV, radio and newspaper) are often proposed on Weibo. Students like viewing and forwarding these Weibo posts to share their attitudes. These range from big political issues like elections in other countries, terrorist attacks and military actions, to very broad topics of social life in different places, such as new technology invented and cultural exhibitions or ethnical festivals held somewhere in the world.

The international topics gain much more attention than those related to China. This means young people care more about the relationship between their own country and the outside world. One typical example is the continuing territorial dispute between China and Japan owing to historical problems. Every time the dispute returns to the foreground in the news, young students return to thinking about, and therefore talking about, this topic. Relevant discussions on the two forums usually focus on several key points: how should we look on the problem of Fishing Islands between the two countries? Should Chinese people support the boycotting of Japanese products? How do we deal with our personal relationship with Japanese friends when the diplomatic relationship becomes worse? Although topics posted seem to be similar, concrete content and the emotions of the discussions differ. Some leading opinions can be found on Weibo, which advocate mutual understanding, rational patriotism, and no harm to Japanese and Chinese people, while addressing the need to protect Chinese territorial integrity. These discussions seem to keep a calm manner and try to persuade young people objectively and rationally thinking international wrangles with long discourses and sufficient evidence, but should be on the basis of protecting national territorial integrity.

Besides, Weibo posts contain more polarised expressions, either very emotional expressions or rational analysis can be found, with the phrase like ‘hate Japan and Japanese’, ‘don’t forget the history’, ‘Boycott won’t help! Don’t be foolish!’, or ‘be careful with crazy nationalism’, ‘how did Fishing Island problem start- the historical truth I will tell you’. Some of the Weibo posts also provide internet links where relevant background knowledge of these issues can be read in detail. It appears that prejudices and rationality coexist on Weibo at the same time.



## **In-depth interviews**

In-depth interviews also played an important role in our ethnographical research because it not only helped us collect descriptive first-hand data from interviewees, but also helped to supplement and test the data collected through our OPO. We employed both un-structured and semi-structured interviews. At the pilot stage, the first researcher used snowball sampling to select 20 university students, university teachers and websites producers as interviewees. Un-structured online interviews were carried out via instant message system (MSN, QQ), in order to collect general impressions, problems and potentials about daily internet use of young people, general online participation as well as civic participation. However, un-structured interviews were only used as an informal approach in support of our data collection. The formal process relied on a semi-structured approach through which we examined a further three sub-questions:

- what factors affected students' civic participation?;
- what impact did they feel their participation had achieved?;
- what are the educational implications for learning institutions of this type of students' civic participation?

The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, in order to further discuss and explore reasons, impacts, problems, difficulties and possibilities of youth cyber civic participation. Also, it aimed to collect suggestions and recommendations from students themselves and educators for promoting future citizenship education in China. We finally interviewed 55 participants in 6 universities, including 47 student interviewees (SIs) and 8 teacher interviewees (TIs). Most of the participants were interviewed individually, with a

minority interviewed in pairs or threes. Each interviews lasted 40 minutes to 1 hour. Principal interview questions refer to:

- students' internet use habits (favourite websites, topics, activities)
- students' interests, topics and activities in political and social fields
- forms of participation and strategies that students used for cyber civic participation
- real experiences and stories of students' cyber civic participation
- reasons for why students did or did not join in civic activities
- results and influence of students' civic participation and their own reflections
- problem-solving suggestions or educational recommendations from students and teachers

All interview data has been stored by digital audio recorder, transcribed into text form, imported and analysed by the computer software Nvivo. Systematic coding and discourse analysis are the main approaches used for our data analysis. The two examples selected below show how we collected and analysed interview data.

### **A gender difference in civic topical discussion**

There is a gender difference in that men are more likely to be involved in online civic discussions than women. Male students 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 contrary, female students felt uneasy to understand 'so called citizenship, which consists of a set of big and vague topics which men always talk about'. Girls' dominant interests on SNSs were more grounded in their personal lives, such as food, beauty, shopping and fashion (SI 17, 18 and 19). From a female perspective, men just liked to show

off their supposed maturity by discussing big issues. However, this gender difference was not absolute, nor constant.

### **Cyber civic participation as an informal way for civic learning**

Interviewed students mentioned that they learnt both non-official and official civic knowledge through online chatting. The meaning of ‘official’ here refers to structured knowledge provided by authorities, mainstream media or university curriculum. ‘Non-official’ contains more personalised and fragmentary knowledge. Students who are often actively engaged in online discussion reviewed their gossiping with others and admitted that discussion can become a learning process for civic knowledge. For example, several female students in our research told a story about liking online shopping and how they usually talk about shopping-related issues on university forums. At the beginning, their conversation focused more on ‘what brands of clothes and cosmetics are on sale’ or ‘how to get more discount or vouchers when buying a product’. When they found that some sellers on the university forum were discount selling products for particular charity purpose, such as helping blind and deaf-mute children, they were more likely to buy these products. During enquiries about purchasing, they talked with sellers and other buyers online, and got to know what special care these students needed, what policies and conditions should follow for organising a charity selling online, how to open a charity shop online, and what advantages and difficulties a charity seller may encounter on the forum. And then they admitted that this discussion and purchasing process helped them to better understand the online charity bazaar (SI 2, 4 and 5). In this case, students gained both official and non-official knowledge from different channels.

Interviewed students also mentioned that they learnt some civic skills during the process of cyber civic participation, especially when successfully transferring online discussion into offline actions. There are two examples provided by our interviewees:

I saw many students in my university complain about the slippery floor in university public bathrooms by posting on the Oiegg forum. I was one of them. Actually several students reported that they fell over and got hurt because of this problem. These posts were widely forwarded and noticed by the university authority. One of the public service departments in charge replied to students' posts and promised that they would solve this problem as soon as possible. Finally, with non-slip mats placed, the students' appeals got satisfactory solution.

(SI 6)

I used to work in an environmental protection society at my university. We once initiated a campaign called 'One hour for the Earth', calling for energy saving actions among students. We published posts on different online spaces, including Oiegg, Renren and Weibo for publicity. We encouraged students to shut down all of lights from 8:00-9:00pm on 22 April (Earth Day) in the campus. When saw the whole campus became dark in that one hour, I knew we got a great success.

(SI 2)

These students have proved their capability with online civic participation and their potential for being active citizens on as well as offline. They have learnt a lot: not only developing skills of seizing knowledge and critical thinking, but also of communication and negotiation. Moreover, they have been equipped with awareness and values like international understanding, justice and tolerance, freedom of expression, individual rights and a sense of responsibility. It is therefore through cyber civic participation that civic learning can be boosted.

## **Future directions for research**

From the above, we have illustrated why and how we propose a research theme and how choose an appropriate methodology. Since the name of this book is *New Directions for Educational Research in China*, we wanted to present one approach towards re-thinking education and developing education research. We especially want to inspire readers to realise that in the world we live in the contents and forms of education are changing dramatically, and that educational research approaches need to keep pace with such change.

The emergence of virtual ethnography within social sciences is an exciting development. We have reviewed the rationale, definition, process and function of using this methodology. This chapter can act as a guide for students and scholars who are interested in similar research areas of

- youth interactive and participatory culture in cyber space,
- youth civic participation and social changes influencing citizenship education
- university cultural change and education reform

In future publications we will be sharing the wider research findings, which reveal a new type of relationship between young people and the authorities, teachers, as well as their peer group.

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