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Cybercafés in China: Community Access beyond Gaming and Tight Government Control

Jack Linchuan Qiu 邱林川

Abstract

This article offers a historical overview and critique of cybercafés in China. Four phases of development are introduced: the initial "technological enlightenment" phase of the late 1990s; the turbulent, "crackdown" years after 1999; the new growth period of 2004–2008; and the latest phase of consolidation since 2009. By reviewing the key incidents, players, and official statistics, this paper goes beyond the popular issues of gaming and crackdowns to offer a more comprehensive contextualization and explanation. It interrogates the relationship between the cybercafé and the community, and offers analysis of three fundamental issues—job creation in the community, affordable leisure activities, and youth socialization beyond family. Results from a news discourse analysis are then presented to show how the Chinese press reported on cybercafés from 2000–2009, how their news frames changed, and alternative modes of understanding and operating cybercafés. The paper concludes by presenting the broader implications for community informatics in China that can be drawn from the examination of cybercafés.

Introduction

The cybercafé—usually called *wangba* 网吧 ("net-bar" in Chinese)—is arguably the most important venue for Internet access in China's urban and rural communities. Despite a humiliating decline in status—they were considered temples of enlightenment in the 1990s but are now characterized as dangerous dungeons of Internet addiction—cybercafés remain a crucial pillar of community in China's emerging network society in terms of infrastructure, service provision, and sociocultural innovation (Qiu, 2009). As of July 2012, 138.8 million Chinese citizens—25.8 percent of

total Internet users in China—patronized cybercafés on a regular basis (CNNIC, 2012). This number is equivalent to 56.6 percent of the Internet-user population in the U.S. and more than all the Internet users in Japan and Turkey combined.[1]

This massive phenomenon has received, however, scant scholarly attention in information management and community studies, in part because cybercafés in China are almost all privately operated businesses. Due to the widespread stigmatization of cybercafés as spaces of crime and addiction (Golub & Lingley, 2008; Lindtner & Szablewics, 2010), they receive no public funding or official blessing. They almost exclusively serve those with fewer resources, mostly youth and migrant workers, generating unimpressive profits through "entertainment" services such as gaming, which may not look "informational" enough for serious examination.

They are, nonetheless a critical element of community informatics in contemporary China, whose technological modernization is as remarkable as the corrosion of its traditional communal ties. Capitalist expansion, increasing social inequality, the one-child policy, the rise of IT as a leading industrial sector, and the continuation of one-party rule have all contributed to the rise, fall, and persisting centrality of cybercafés in Chinese communities. Can cybercafés help repair the ties that bind in the digital domains of community informatics? Or are they merely a reflection of a hopeless reality, where neither inclusion, nor the organic reconstruction of Chinese communities, can ever be achieved?

This article addresses these broad questions by offering a historical critique of the cybercafé in China—its key events, players, business models, regulatory structures, and the rise and ebb of what could be called the cybercafé moral panic. Data and materials for this analytical synthesis are drawn from official statistics and archives, industry reports, and journalistic coverage, as well as "observation" and interview" field trips to more than one-hundred cybercafés in urban and rural China conducted since the late 1990s.

Historical Overview

Cybercafés appeared in China in 1996, one year after commercial Internet service first became available to the Chinese public. Since then, the short history of the cybercafé has been full of twists and turns, much more so than that of other wired or wireless IT services in the country. This is because, as in most countries (Liff & Laegran, 2003; Mutula, 2003; Wakeford, 2003; Adomi, 2007; Yesil, 2007), China's cybercafé business tends to be small scale, serving those with fewer resources—such as youth, migrants, and rural residents.

Why do cybercafés remain mostly microenterprises, despite the efforts of the Chinese authorities to transform cybercafés into larger-scale na-

tionwide chain stores (Qiu & Zhou, 2005)? Besides the usual economic explanations, two historical reasons stand out. On the one hand, cyber-cafés descended very quickly from an upper-class to a working-class form of information and communication technology (ICT). The notion of "working-class ICT" refers to a range of technological devices and services, often operated by microentrepreneurs and their employees, that serve members of the lower classes—that is, the "information have-less," which includes a wide variety of "low-income groups [who] populate an expansive gray zone of the digital divide" (Cartier, Castells, & Qiu, 2005, p. 11). On the other hand, cybercafés depend on a wired Internet connection and by definition take root in concrete places, be they urban communities or rural villages. As a result, they become interwoven with community politics on the ground (Guo, 2003; Qiu, 2009) and are therefore of particular interest for community informatics. The cybercafé sector's boom–bust cycles are indeed catastrophic in commercial terms, but historically they reflect the internal dynamics of Chinese communities, the profound problems they face, and their resilience in an authoritarian context.

China's first cybercafés were called *wangluo kafeiwu* 网络咖啡屋, meaning literally "Internet coffee houses." In 1996, Info Highway Inc. 瀛海威公司, China's first Internet service provider (ISP), opened the most famous cybercafé at the time, Internet Science-Education Hall 网络科教馆. Located in the heart of Zhongguancun, Beijing's main IT hub, it was the most prominent landmark of the early history of China's Internet history. The name "Science-Education Hall" shows that its purpose was primarily for public education about Internet-related scientific knowledge and skills. Designed to nurture a domestic Internet market, the main goal of this cybercafé was promotional, not profit making (Zhang S., interview, 18 June 2008), although unlike most of China's huge state-owned ISPs today, Info Highway was a private start-up with only RMB 80 million invested in it (Wu, 2004).

Promotional cybercafés were soon followed by for-profit cafés, which basically prospered by buying Internet access wholesale and selling it retail. Technical support was provided along with the occasional sales of Nestlé instant coffee, a popular gift item among the urban upper classes at the time. The overall business model was simple but quite lucrative because they mostly targeted wealthy foreigners, including tourists, and Chinese students seeking overseas education. In other words, until about 2000, they were not to be found in ordinary communities of the big cities, let alone in small cities and the countryside.

The turn of the century witnessed the rapid descent of cybercafés from being elite places of education, enlightenment, and global connectivity. Most of the new cybercafés fell into the category of the "mass-service net-bar," offering low-end entertainment, particularly gaming, but also online

chatting and video watching (Qiu, 2009). They emerged in all kinds of working-class communities, small towns, and rural areas, away from the prime real-estate districts (Guo, 2003; Ding, 2009).

Official and popular discourse usually explains the downward drift in the context of a moral panic framework, within which illegal—that is, "black" cybercafés 黑网吧—became targets of law enforcement and high-profile crackdowns (Qiu, 2009; Lindter & Szablewics, 2010). The most notorious was the fire at Lanjisu 蓝极速 cybercafé in Beijing in June 2002 that killed twenty-five young people, mainly college students. This remains the most deadly fire in the nation's capital since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949.

The Lanjisu fire was undoubtedly tragic; yet so were the many crackdowns that forced cybercafé owners into bankruptcy, resulting in operators being laid off and working-class users being cut off from the Internet. However, it is misleading to deem official crackdowns as responsive to illegal activities in cybercafés, for as we shall see, the crackdowns in fact contributed to the illegal activities. As national statistics demonstrate, despite the rapid growth of Internet access in the country, the cybercafé user population became stagnant in 2000. It even decreased from 4.64 to 4.03 million in the first half of 2001, long before the nationwide crackdown following Lanjisu in the second half of 2002 (figure 1).

What happened? Two waves of crackdowns ensued, the first of which played a decisive role in the downturn of the cybercafé in China. Four phases in the history of cybercafés in China can be identified: (1) enlightenment, 1996–1999; (2) turbulence, 2000–2003; (3) new growth period, 2004–2008; and (4) consolidation, 2009–2012.

In summer 1999, Beijing began its campaign against the "cult" of Falun Gong 法轮功, which officials perceived as the biggest threat since the 1989 Tiananmen movement. It severely strangled China's media system as a whole (Zhao, 2003)—including cybercafés—because the Internet was "used extensively" by Falun Gong practitioners to transmit "confidential messages [that] were sometimes encrypted" (Tong, 2002, p. 647).

One reason for the rise of Falun Gong was the collapse of the community-based public health system (including both medical care and health information exchange) that had materialized over the Maoist decades. But the Falun Gong crackdown took a much higher route, impacting cybercafés through ministry-level power bargaining. China's first regulation of cybercafés, *Announcement for the Standardization of Commercial Activities in Cybercafés and the Strengthening of Security Management* 关于规范网吧经营行为加强安全管理的通知, was promulgated in December 1998. It specified that the Ministry of Public Security (MPS)—namely, the police—would be the main regulator of cybercafés in the country. The original intention was to prevent Tiananmen dissidents from using the Internet. But the Falun Gong crackdown in the following year went beyond this motivation.
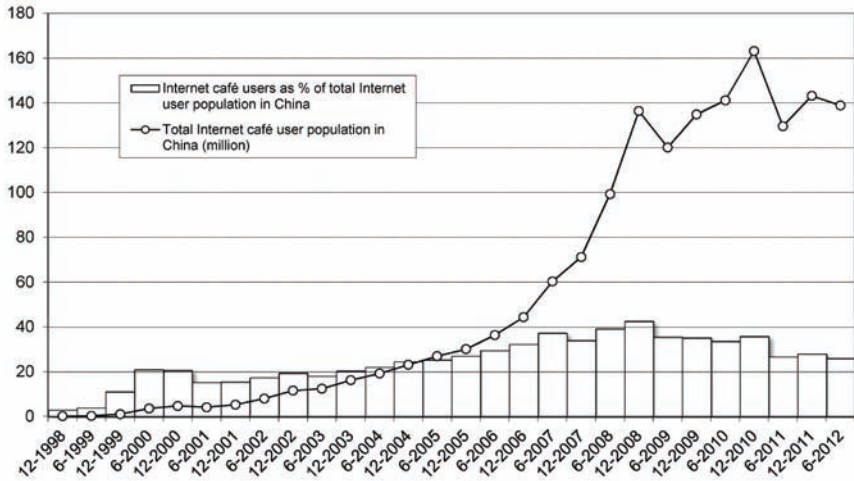
Figure 1. The growth of cybercafé activity in China: cybercafé users as a percentage of total Internet users, and the total number of cybercafé users (source: compilation based on CNNIC (1999–2012).

In April 2001, more than a year before the Lanjisu fire, the Ministry of Information Industries. (MII) also released its *Measures for the Administration of Business Sites of Internet Access Services* 互联网上网服务营业场所管理办法. This document demonstrated the authorities' deep concern about cybercafés. In comparison, since the fire there has been only one new nationwide cybercafé regulation, promulgated in September 2002, namely, the *Regulation on the Administration of Business Sites of Internet Access Services* 互联网上网服务营业场所管理条例. This last regulation established that the the Ministry of Culture (MoC) would assume the central role in supervising all cybercafés in China (Qiu & Zhou, 2005).

While the MPS is notorious for its heavy-handed campaigns and the MII for its bias toward the telecom industry, the MoC leadership is a sign that Beijing is attempting to maintain some balance between political control and commercial growth. The sidelining of both MPS and MII, at least in the national regulatory structure, led to an important consequence, namely, the preservation of the small-scale, community-based nature of cybercafé businesses. Although the MoC itself quickly evolved into a self-interested force trying to "upgrade" cybercafés into nationwide chain stores, the attempt has been largely in vain. Today, China's cybercafés are still mostly small, independent ones. The few significant chain stores are mostly regional, being located in the wealthy coastal areas, whose ties with MoC are tenuous.

To contextualize this *failure* of top-down upgrading (a rare phenomenon given the country's authoritarian rule), one should understand the strong

sense of entrepreneurship in Chinese communities from the bottom up. It is, however, misleading to stereotype Chinese people as naturally enterprising or to argue that their entrepreneurial energy, long suppressed in the Maoist era, finally erupted due to post-Mao marketization policies. Rather, the resilience of microenterprises results from the combination of at least four factors: (1) the tremendous communicative—including informational, entertainment, and social networking—needs among the lower classes; (2) the lack of alternative job opportunities for the lower social strata; (3) the rise of new commercial mass media, which failed to meet the needs of the lower classes but succeeded in popularizing the myth of a digital gold rush; and (4) the patron-client relationship between certain local authorities and cybercafé businesses, the latter being forced, formally or informally, to pay for protection.

On the eve of the turbulent, or "crackdown," phase, China's most famous cybercafé entrepreneur was probably Wang Yuesheng 王跃胜, who started the Feiyu 飞宇 cybercafé in 1998. His business grew tremendously in the next two years, and the cybercafé soon expanded to occupy what had been ten shops, offering 1,500 computers and occupying 6,000 square meters of prime commercial space along the South Wall of Peking University (Gan, 2001). This was the largest-ever cybercafé in China—and possibly, in the world.[2] It belonged to the first phase of cybercafé history in China, a brief phase of technological enlightenment and commercial boom that began to end in 1999.

One year after the start of the Falun Gong campaign, Feiyu fell victim to the police crackdown because a few (around 5 percent) of its computers reportedly contained "pornographic information." It was then subjected to heavy fines, and eventually the premises were closed down in April 2001. Against the background of the second phase of cybercafé history, lasting roughly from 1999 to 2004, characterized by turbulence and a series of devastating events—the Falun Gong campaign, the crackdown following the Lanjisu fire, and the SARS epidemic[3]—the Feiyu enterprise never recovered.

However, even during this turbulent phase, the cybercafé business experienced a "defiant upsurge" because urbanization and industrialization led to an outburst of communication needs among the lower classes, which were ignored by mainstream mass media. For instance, my cybercafé interviewees in the early 2000s included many laid-off workers, who became either microentrepreneurs or café managers (known as *wangguan* 网管) running cybercafé businesses.

Another growth period followed between 2004 and 2008, when the official crackdowns became less pursued and less severe and cybercafé operators became more organized in their collective pursuit. Nationwide websites and online forums emerged for café operators such as Tian-
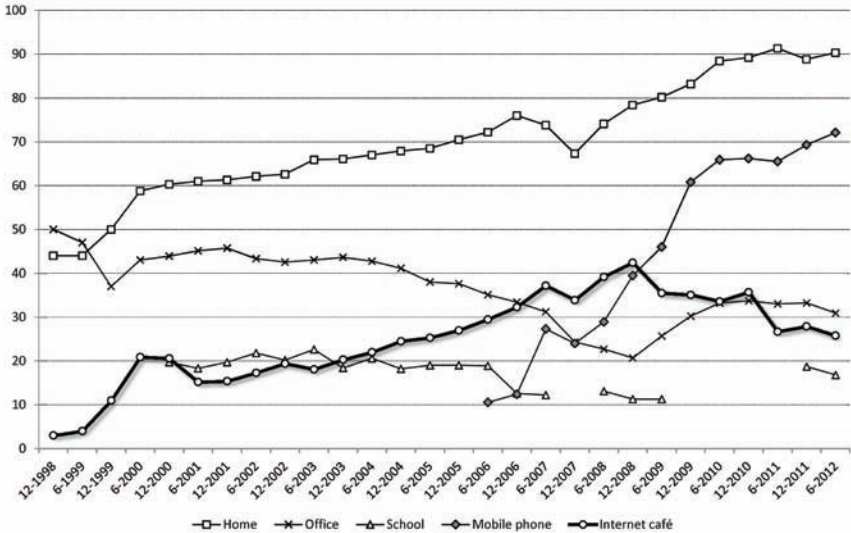
Figure 2. Five ways people access the Internet, shown as percent of all Internet users in China. (source: compilation based on CNNIC, 1999–2012).

xiawangmeng 天下网盟.[4] Regionally, there were more networks of operators based on face-to-face and telephone communication, which were capable of starting such collective actions as the strike in Lishui 丽水, where all cybercafés in the small city coordinated, and succeeded, in protesting the local police clampdown in November 2004. The largest collective action during 2004–2005 was against the online gaming industry, especially Shangda 盛大, the most prominent gaming company in China at the time, because cybercafé operators thought the gaming industry was treating them unfairly. Online polemics flourished, resulting in skirmishes offline (Qiu, 2009).

In 2007, the cybercafé surpassed the workplace to become the second-most important place for Chinese Internet users to go online, following only home access (figure 2). This trend, however, lasted a mere two years until the end of 2008, when a new force emerged to undermine the cybercafé business—namely mobile Internet access. By 2011, the cybercafé fell behind workplace access again to become the fourth popular mode of Internet access, while mobile-phone access continued to soar, including among lower-class Internet users.

This last phase since 2009 has been marked by a steady decline of cybercafé users relative to China's Internet user population overall, while the total number of café users fluctuates around 140 million. At the end of 2008, cybercafés served 42.4 percent of all Internet users; this dropped to 25.8

percent by June 2012. During the same period, the proportion of mobile-phone users leaped from 39.4 percent to 72.1 percent. For cybercafé businesses, the diffusion of mobile Internet means not only more competition and thinner profit margins but also more consolidation in the market. On the one hand, the stores that have been doing relatively well are more likely to weather the storm. According to Tianxiawangmeng (2011), more cybercafés have formed their own chains in 2011, although independent stores still account for 63.16 percent of all cybercafés in China. On the other hand, gaming, video watching, and other immersive online experiences delivered through a big screen have become further highlighted because mobile Internet still cannot compete on these services due to the physical constraints of mobile devices.

Yet the most formidable change brought by mobile Internet is not the device or the further push to scale up. It is, in fact, the Chinese communities themselves now struggling to withstand the ultimate challenge of privatization and the disintegration of collective modes of communication. Without rediscovering community, cybercafés will become just another business, obsessed with the soulless pursuit of profit, incapable of fending off crackdowns or market failures and doomed to end in oblivion. Where then is community—imagined or real—and the soul of the cybercafé in China?

CYBERCAFÉ AND COMMUNITY

The award-winning journalist Paul Mason began his 2008 book in Gangxia 岗厦, a crowded community of migrant workers in South China. In the early 1980s, Gangxia was a rural village. By 2003 it had become highly urbanized but, notwithstanding digital connections, without the public spaces that normally characterize urban life. As Mason (2008) observed:

> In just 20 years Gangxia workers have built a community as tightly knit as in the fearsome slums that terrified English social reformers during the Industrial Revolution. The big difference is the total absence of a political public space. There is a chalk mural in Gangxia extolling the virtues of the People's Liberation Army, but nothing else. The public area, such as it exists, is the mobile phone network or the Internet café, where each PC has a sticker on the monitor warning that "subversion" is a crime. (p. 6)

This Gangxia café is symptomatic of the larger issues facing not only cybercafés but also contemporary Chinese communities in general. Globally speaking, increasing social inequality and rising population mobility have resulted in rapid urbanization, especially in the developing world (Taylor, Firth, Hoyler, & Dennis, 2010). An often-forgotten fact is that, for the new urban communities like Gangxia to emerge, many more rural communities in the hinterland, and often some older urban communities as well, had to lose people, resources, and independence. The emergence of the

cybercafé responds to the very different local contexts, catering to the needs of different social groups, creating centrifugal and/or centripetal forces that exacerbate existing propensities of the community.

Cybercafés have sprung up in almost all communities in China, urban and rural, new and old, especially where the residents belong to the lower classes or come from mixed backgrounds. The challenges faced by communities find expression through the cybercafés, which may also contribute to solving some of the thorny challenges. This is not easy because Chinese communities are caught between the pressure of authoritarian rule and the atomizing effect of privatization. Combined, the two forces lead to decreasing public space in communities and eroding social networks among residents.

The spread of cybercafés does not in itself alter the fundamental challenge posed by these two forces, which have devastated local communities as well as cybercafés. Yet as discussed below, the microenterprises can address certain issues and generate partial solutions to the two fundamental challenges, thereby creating opportunities for community renewal and new collective formation, both digitally and tangibly.

The first issue is unemployment, not only in rural communities but also old Maoist-style *danwei* 单位 communities that dominated Chinese cities.[5] By the time cybercafés became popular in the late 1990s, the rural-to-urban exodus was well underway due to insufficient job opportunities in the countryside. The 1990s were also characterized by China's neoliberal reform of state-owned enterprises and urban collective enterprises that led to the layoff of over 60 million employees between 1993 and 2006 (Hurst, 2009, p. 1). The impact was nationwide on an entire generation of workers, which was particularly severe in traditional industrial zones such as Northeast China. Hence, despite official crackdowns, laid-off workers became a major social group who turned into cybercafé operators—owners and employees—well into the 2000s. They hired migrants from small towns and rural villages to run the businesses. Considerable job opportunities were created in the communities as well as in IT malls, which serve as regional cybercafé service centers. It is not uncommon for the IT malls to have a special section or entire floor just to sell and repair computers intended for cybercafé use. These new jobs are not only meaningful for migrants in destination communities; they add to the sustainability of older communities as well—for example, via remittances to families back home.

According to MoC, by the end of 2009 there were 138,000 cybercafés in China, generating 580,000 jobs (Guo, 2011). This does not include unregistered "black net-bars," whose number is much higher. It is important to emphasize that these jobs are more than economic opportunities. They challenge traditional notions of information exchange globally and of community information services in the Chinese context. Too often IT-

sector jobs are seen as high-end, easily "outsourced" if not offshored, and conceptually very remote from residential communities (Carnoy, 2000). Meanwhile, when Chinese authorities plan to deliver community information services—for example, through bulletin boards, public libraries, district-level cultural stations (*wenhuazhan* 文化站), or wired radio broadcast systems (*youxian guangbozhan* 有线广播站)—their conception is usually confined to free-of-charge propagation by public-sector employees (Sun, 2012).

The wide diffusion of cybercafés means that IT-sector jobs can materialize within existing communities because they meet the needs of residents—including migrants as well as less-mobile residents—who are striving for economic opportunities. This is true for both café operators and typical users, including those who sometimes transform cybercafés into productive spaces. One example is the "gold farmers," who turn cybercafés into their "studios," allowing them to accumulate and trade virtual currencies in online games for real-world profit (Heek, 2010). The scope of such "productive" activities remain limited, in part because official crackdowns have made cafés more vulnerable and operators have either chosen or were forced to use PCs without normal input equipment such as CD-ROM drives and USB plugs. The intention was to prevent customers from spreading "harmful" information such as dissident messages or computer viruses. The result was that cybercafé PCs became a special species of computers optimized for entertainment use—using these machines for political or civic activities would be relatively difficult.

However, once the pattern of the community-based IT economy becomes regularized, cybercafé PCs may still serve as the basis for sociopolitical formation as was the case in the Lishui cybercafé strike and the Uniden demonstration blogs. Lishui café operators successfully organized to resist a local state clampdown in 2004 (Qiu, 2009, p. 37). In the same year, Uniden, a factory manufacturing electronic products for Wal-Mart, experienced a major strike when workers made impressive use of cybercafés to publicize their account of the events through Weblogs (Qiu, pp. 193–195). Although these incidents were limited in scale, they demonstrate the political potential of cybercafés once members of the community are mobilized to protect their collective interests.

The second key issue is the lack of affordable leisure activity in urban and rural communities. Cybercafés throughout the country are used for online gaming, watching video, and online chatting (e.g., through QQ, China's one-stop-shop for these and other activities). This has been true for most of the cybercafés' short history. The popularity of these activities was among the main reasons why mainstream media often have associated cybercafés with "moral decay" and "addiction" (Golub & Lingley, 2008), although in the next section, closer examination of media reports will reveal an array of depictions.

This gives one cause to reflect: is leisure really a threat to community? Or, is the real culprit the excessive commodification and privatization of leisure, of which the cybercafé is but one symptom? Countless studies find that leisure activities are among the most effective and most time-honored ways of community building (Rojek, Shaw, & Veal, 206). Communal life often flourishes through singing, dancing, storytelling, drawing, sports games, and religious ceremonies. These activities are ritualistic as well as entertaining. They take place collectively in public space and across time. They strengthen communal ties between generations.

In other words, leisure activities are integral to community life, and there is nothing intrinsically anticommunity in leisure. This does not dismiss the contention that commercialized cybercafé activities—including gambling, which sometimes becomes indistinguishable from gaming (Jiu, 2005)—have indeed lured residents away from communal life. However, it is at least equally common to see cybercafés helping to create new social ties and renew old ones.

A case in point is Feiyu, once China's largest cybercafé, which, before its forced eviction, offered its Internet access free-of-charge from seven a.m. to nine a.m. each day. It created a new gathering space for everyone, rich or poor, educated or not, to explore the online world while getting to know each other; this came to include not only Peking University students, the main population of the community, but also migrant workers from small businesses nearby. Similar arrangements existed in Shanghai and Chengdu, especially for young people. In Guangzhou, a cybercafé offered senior citizens free online hours, also early in the morning, when the most popular activities included playing chess online and e-mailing adult children overseas (interview, July 11, 2002). Although only a few of the cybercafés I visited offer such free services, in my interviews it was quite common for café owners to talk about their businesses as an integral part of the surrounding physical community, noting their belief that the leisure activities in their cafés energize the community at large while still generating revenue.

Unfortunately, few of these more-community-minded cybercafés managed to survive the combination of official crackdowns and vicious market competition, itself a "downward spiral" created by unfair power relationships at the structural level (Qiu, 2009, p. 49). However, even cafés that are designed to maximize investment returns—and where the operators care nothing about community—cannot prevent individual users from supporting collective formations.

One rural-to-urban migrant worker—referred to here as Mr. Z to protect his identity—went online in 2005 only through cybercafés for gaming and chatting, "to flirt with girls through QQ," as he admitted. One year later, he lost a hand in an industrial accident in Shenzhen. In order to get legal compensation, he frequented cybercafés to look for state regulations

and seek help. Every time he finished an online session, he stored the useful information in a folder under his QQ account. "This was very crucial," he explained, "because I had no other way to remember the phone numbers, Web addresses, policy documents, and other cases relevant to mine. It is so humid and dirty [in the industrial zone] that no piece of paper could last very long" (interview, October 31, 2010).

After nearly a year, Mr. Z had his case heard—with a successful outcome. But his QQ folder became a collective resource as he began to offer free consultation to other victims of work injury. His reputation grew in the community, and a local labor NGO hired him to serve other workers. This NGO has its own online computers, meaning Mr. Z no longer needs to pay to use QQ in cybercafés. But his transition would have been impossible without these cafés. As can be seen in this case, leisure activities not only create a gathering-place in community, but they may also pave the way for other informational, social, even political activities, once the communicative needs arise.

Youth socialization beyond the family, shaped by China's one-child policy, constitutes the third major challenge for Chinese communities, urban or rural. Having children offers a fundamental, and indispensable, basis for the long-lasting vitality of communities. But having only one child per family changes the dynamics, particularly in a context of rapid commercialization. In the cities, the "only-child community" (Nelson & Chen, 2007) becomes the norm when families become more inward looking and ruthless academic competition among kids becomes the focus of collective attention.

As Fengshu Liu discovered through in-depth interviews in a medium-sized city in North China, children and young people visit cybercafés "often against the will of various authorities, for a sense of freedom, relaxation, community, and equality as well as fun, which can hardly be found elsewhere in their lives" (2009, p. 167). The strong attraction of cybercafé results from

> a range of factors, such as their singleton status, high parental expectations, the competitive educational and economic systems, the authoritarian political culture, and the lasting influence of a hierarchical tradition that sees young people as juniors in both the family and society [and] tends to leave inadequate room for individual self-expression and social-political participation. (p. 172)

In other words, cybercafés are magnets for youth, not just because of their digital services, which sometimes are of secondary importance, but because of the simple fact that they are among the very few "hangout spots" where young people can mingle without the pressure of school and family patriarchies. Most of these urban youngsters have computers at home, but these machines are under strict parental control. Their schools perhaps have even more computers, but the regulatory systems

there are even more draconian. If they have to find a "great good place" (Oldenburg, 1999) for their community in the digital era, the cybercafé, despite its problems, may be the closest possibility. Yet even these places are stigmatized and subject to crackdowns due to the moral panic created by the authorities and mass media (Golub & Lingley, 2008) and magnified through interpersonal channels in the community. At this moment, however, there is probably nothing at the community level that can substitute for cybercafés in Chinese cities as affordable places for youth socialization, especially in relation to the Internet, which has become such a center-piece of urban youth life.

The countryside, on the other hand, is increasingly characterized by communities of "left-behind" children (Bu, 2008), whose parents become migrant workers to earn disposable income in order for the kids to get a better education, even go to college, which has become increasingly expensive. Calculation based on the Fifth National Census shows that, by 2000, there were more than 284 million "left-behind" children in rural China, whose parents (either one or both) had migrated for work (Duan & Zhou, 2006). The separation of parents and children (now taken care of by grandparents and other relatives) produces a very different landscape in rural communities, although the root causes—the one-child policy, excessive commercialization, fierce academic competition, authoritarianism in the family, and school—are similar to the issues urbanites face.

Lower computer penetration in households adds to the popularity of cybercafés in rural communities, where young people have a strong motivation to "escape" from the culturally drained rural villages. In order to boost domestic consumption, the Chinese government has since 2007 promoted its "electronic appliances to the countryside" (*jiadianxiaxiang* 家电下乡) program (Lin & Wong, 2012). This has resulted in improved electricity supply and broadband access in rural communities, where cybercafés have emerged in remote areas. However, when I visited some of these rural cybercafés in 2011–2012 in Hubei and Fujian, there was little change from my first visit to a café in 2002 in rural Sichuan. The rooms were dark, noisy, and full of adolescents playing online games while some were smoking cigarettes. The lack of change in these cybercafés is but one indicator of the deteriorating problem of youth development and unsustainable communities in China.

The remaining question is: could it have been otherwise?

Discourse Beyond Crackdown

This section examines Chinese press coverage of cybercafés in the first decade of the new century. Despite the increasing commercialization of the press, newspapers in China are under government control. They are therefore much more than simple reflections of public opinion. Rather, they are part and parcel of the larger state regulatory process, responding

also to demands in the news market itself. They influence policy making as well as social imagination, ultimately helping to shape the relationship between cybercafés and communities on the ground.

When foreign media report on China's cybercafés, the focus is usually on government crackdowns, which has become a stereotypical narrative framework or "news frame" (Fairclough, 1995). Yet if we look at news within China, there are interesting differences. One the one hand, press coverage has indeed been a culprit for the cybercafé moral panic. On the other hand, press coverage also reveals considerable evidence of possibilities beyond stigmatization. These are not idealistic plans for the future. They have existed in the past.

Soon after cybercafés first appeared in China in the mid-1990s, news media played an effective role in popularizing the digital gold rush, persuading people that computers, the Internet, and cybercafés were all promising opportunities for the future of business. Mr. Wang Yuesheng started Feiyu in 1998, which later became the largest cybercafé in the country. He admitted that his strong interests in this "new economy" sector first came from "media propaganda" 媒体宣传 (Gan, 2001, p. 32).

To capture historical change in media discourse, we systematically selected 80 news reports from each of 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2009, which add up to a total of 320 articles.[6] Using the most comprehensive WiseNews 慧科搜索 search engine, we identified twenty of the longest articles in the months of March, June, September, and December of the selected years, whose headlines contain the word "cybercafé" (*wangba* 网吧). The newspapers included official party organs, market-oriented press, and trade newspapers. We then imported the articles into the NVIVO analytical software to assist in our close reading and analysis. The results are four basic news frames as shown in table 1.

The four basic frames are (a) industry growth: understanding cybercafés from the perspective of economic development, including job creation, the hardware and software market, and the net-bar chains; (b) crackdown: reporting on incidents or regulatory changes increasing pressure upon cybercafés, administratively or financially, sometimes leading even to business shutdown; (c) youth addiction: the holding of cybercafés responsible for the Internet's mismanagement by their offering of addictive online gaming services; and (d) crime: characterizations of cybercafés as breeding grounds for illegal activities from petty theft to drug use to organized crime.

Both (c) and (d) provide moral justifications for crackdowns and more stringent regulation, meaning they are the closest to the "moral panic" news frames. But (c) and (d) only account for 18.13 and 4.69 percent of all articles, respectively; that is, altogether 22.82 percent, less than a quarter of all reports. Although another 30.9 percent of all articles used the crackdown news frame, the combination of these three frames (b, c, and

Table 1. Discursive Frames for Cybercafé Press Coverage in Chinese Newspapers, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009

Frames Year	Industry Growth		Crackdown		Youth Addiction		Crime		Unspecified	
	N	% of Annual Reports	N	% of Annual Reports	N	% of Annual Reports	N	% of Annual Reports	N	% of Annual Reports
2000 N = 80	9	11.25	26	32.5	16	20	3	3.75	26	32.5
2003 N = 80	46	57.5	17	21.25	7	8.75	4	5	6	7.5
2006 N = 80	37	46.25	26	32.5	9	11.25	6	7.5	2	2.5
2009 N = 80	12	15	30	37.5	26	32.5	2	2.5	10	12.5
Total N = 320	104%	32.5%	99%	30.9%	58%	18.13%	15%	4.69%	44%	13.75%

Source: WiseNews.

d) represents slightly more than half (53.72 percent) of the press coverage overall.

Surprisingly, industry growth is the most prevalent frame, representing 32.5 percent of all articles. The percentage was the highest (57.5 percent) in 2003, the year that followed the Lanjisu cybercafé fire, when the crackdown and moral panic frameworks only accounted for about one-third (35 percent) of all coverage. In 2006, industry growth also represented nearly half (46.25 percent) of all reports. However, few articles used this industry growth frame at the beginning (2000) or end (2009) of the decade, showing strong tendency of wax and wane over this period.

The fluctuation of industry growth frameworks in the news coverage is particularly obvious when compared with the crackdown frame, which fairly consistently accounted for about one-third of total reports. It is important to note that, in 2000, 32.5 percent of all articles were about crackdowns in various parts of the country, demonstrating again that the authorities tightened control long before the 2002 Lanjisu fire. However, immediately after the fire, crackdowns only accounted for 21.25 percent of new stories in 2003, the lowest amount in the selected years.

It is also interesting to look into the "unspecified" category, which was especially sizable (32.5 percent) in 2000. These articles contain "cybercafé" in their headlines but do not use any of the four basic frames. Rather, they are more open, diverse, and unpredictable than the received ways of covering cybercafés. Their number was the highest in 2000; it dipped below 10 percent in the middle of the decade but increased again in 2009, moving in the opposite direction of "industry growth" articles.

What are these more diverse ways of understanding cybercafés? One report by China Women's Daily (zhongguo funubao 中国妇女报) in March 2000

is a typical "enlightenment" piece reflecting elite opinions of cybercafés as a progressive force in the first phase of Internet development in China. It reads in part, "Cybercafé is not a 'wolf.' The public should not be scared. Being an indicator of information society, the birth of the cybercafé and its existence should be praised as a positive development" (L. Zhang, 2000).

Another article reported on a laid-off worker who started a "healthy" cybercafé in Guannan 灌南, a small town in northern Jiangsu Province. It was published in *China Labor and Social Security News* (*zhongguo laodong baozhangbao* 中国劳动保障报) in September 2000:

> The 36-year-old Wang Jian used to work for Guannan Printing Factory. She was laid off in 1995. She then tried to run businesses in clothing and accessories. Since March, she has invested 120,000 yuan and purchased 17 high-level microcomputers to start the largest, best-equipped, and fastest cybercafé in Guannan. From the very beginning, Wang Jian has positioned her cybercafé as a place with elegance, healthy content, knowledge, and fun. . . . By prioritizing social benefits as the goal of cybercafé development, Wang Jian saw the economic profits from her "Net-bar Global" increasing rather than decreasing. (C. Zhang, 2000)

There are not that many "alternative" reports like these, whose significant presence was overwhelmed by mainstream news frames of large-scale industry development, crackdown, and the inevitable "moral panic" frameworks. However, the very existence of these diverse perceptions and varied practices enables thinking beyond the usual stereotypes, which is precisely what we need to rethink the role of cybercafés in Chinese communities.

Concluding Remarks

Within the study of community informatics in China, the subject of cybercafés is relatively new. Yet, as this article has described, cybercafés have gone through four different phases: the initial "enlightenment" phase of the late 1990s; the turbulent, "crackdown" years after 1999; the new growth period of 2004–2008; and the latest phase of consolidation since 2009. By reviewing the key incidents, players, and official statistics, an attempt has been made here to historicize and contextualize the development of cybercafés in China beyond the single issue of crackdowns. The relationship between cybercafés and community has been critiqued, and explanations offered with regard to three fundamental issues at stake: job creation in the community, affordable leisure activities, and youth socialization beyond the family. Results from a news discourse analysis were then presented to show how the Chinese press reported on cybercafés from 2000 to 2009 and how their news frames changed, and to suggest alternative modes of understanding and operating cybercafés.

I have contended here and elsewhere that the value of our subject cannot be fully appreciated unless we use a collective perspective to rethink

cybercafés as a "commons" for the "information have-less" (Qiu, 2009, pp. 46–50). If we continue to constrain our thinking within the old frameworks of gaming and crackdowns, based on the stigma that cybercafés are nothing but private businesses trying to profit from meaningless entertainment, then community informatics in China will have little or no chance to enter the digital networked era. This is especially so in communities—urban or rural—where ICT ownership remains low, population mobility high, and where traditional institutions (governments and mass media, schools, and families) continue to fail in meeting the full spectrum of communicative needs of local residents, particularly the young.

The cybercafé "commons" is not an unrealistic utopia. It is a vision rooted in the fact that the cybercafé has been the most popular mode of Internet access in China and around the world. Although the more community-minded cafés—which have offered free online hours and free computer training (like Feiyu)—have been driven to the margins, ordinary cybercafés still offer a most affordable leisure space within the budget of the working classes and underclass. On this collective basis, cybercafé owners and individual users have also initiated new sociopolitical formations as seen in the Lishui café strike and the interview with Mr. Z. Although authoritarian rule remains a decisive factor at critical moments of historical devolution in China and elsewhere (e.g., Yesil, 2003; Liu, 2009), and although traditional community keeps dissolving in the mundane business of privatization and profit maximization, new communal practices have begun to materialize in and around the cybercafé.

NOTES

1. According to the official China Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of July 2012, China had 538 million Internet users. In comparison, at the beginning of 2012, the total population of Internet users in the United States is 245.2 million, Japan 101.2 million, Turkey 36.4 million.
2. The world's largest cybercafé, verified by Guinness World Records in November 2008, is ChamsCity Digital Mall in Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria, each offering 1027 computer terminals. See http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/records-1000/largest-internet -caf%C3%A9/.
3. SARS stands for severe acute respiratory syndrome. It was a pandemic that broke out between November 2002 and July 2003, affecting China most seriously, where people had to stay home and public spaces, including cybercafés, were deserted. However, comparing SARS with the 1999–2001 Falun Gong campaign, the former actually had a less severe impact on cybercafé business nationwide (see figures 1 and 2).
4. To be found online at: www.txwm.com.
5. See Bray (2005) for the evolution of *danwei,* or work-unit, in urban China. Danwei is a socialist urban organization providing employment as well as social welfare from cradle to grave for coworkers and their families, who live together in the same residential neighborhood.
6. See Zhang, Wang, and Qiu (2013) for an extended version of this analysis.

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