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Cyberspace and Political Participation in Contemporary China

A Preliminary Assessment Based on Two Case Studies

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Abstract

This paper approaches information technology and the Internet's social and political impact in contemporary China from the perspective of political participation. This paper applies the "public sphere" concept as an analytical tool to define the relationship between public sphere and the newly rising cyberspace. It finds that certain part of cyberspace is the relevant reflection of public sphere in the virtual world. Then the paper turns to political participation process in the context of contemporary China. It argues that political participation in China is composed of at least two layers: behavioral layer aims at directly affects policy-making process, and psychological layer concerns more with broadly involved and engaged in politics in more dimensions. This paper then introduces some basic information about the recent Internet development trend in China. The paper views the Internet regulation in China as a paradox: the party-state encourages the development of the Internet on one hand, while on the other hand believing that it can monitor and censor activities and information flows in cyberspace. The most primary part of the paper is the case study. Two public forums or BBS have been chosen, which are corresponding to the two layers of Chinese political participation process respectively. The first one that corresponds to the behavior layer is the Hepatitis B virus carriers (HBVers) forum, which engages with changing state discrimination against them. The second one that corresponds to the psychological layer is the Tianya BBS. Its membership and discussion topics are very broad and universal. The paper finally concludes that although the cyberspace and Internet make some landmark changes in political participation process and even the whole political system in China, the prospect of political development oriented to a more democratic regime is still dim and pessimistic rather than bright and optimistic. Internet use on its own is unlikely to launch the dawning of a new political age in China.

Keywords: cyberspace, public sphere, civil society, political participation, Internet regulation, authoritarian regime, contemporary China.

Acronyms

BBS	Bulletin Board Systems
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CMC	Computer-mediated Communication
CNNIC	China Internet Information Center
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
DARPA	Defense Advanced Research Program Agency
HB	Hepatitis B
HBV	Hepatitis B Virus
HBVer	Hepatitis B Virus Carrier
ICP	Internet Content Provider
ICT	information and communication technology
ISP	Internet service provider
NPC	National People's Congress

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1. Introduction

1.1 Origin of the research problem

With current increasing maturity and rapid development of information technology, no one could deny that human being has entered the Internet era irreversibly. The cyberspace, which is seemingly virtual but not unrelated to the physical world, has come into being accordingly. Meanwhile, the Internet is now infiltrating into almost all areas of human being's life. The rapid development of Internet society not only causes revolutionary changes in human's everyday economic life, but also challenges our social life profoundly. Given my academic background in political science, I pay more attention to the relevant changes in political life and political systems caused by technological innovation.

From the perspective of political science and sociology, the newly-rising cyberspace overlaps to a large extent with the bourgeois public sphere formulated by Jürgen Habermas in his famous public sphere theory. Though the trace of civil society and public sphere couldn't be found in China's long history, the cyberspace has been gradually constructed with the development of information technology in the Chinese society. Chinese netizens get similar chances to cultivate political characteristics as independent citizens in Western democracies. Such phenomenon and trend will definitely bring a lot of profound effects to China's political system, which is worth paying attention to.

1.2 Research problem

The basic research problems of my study are: first to find out the effects and changes brought about by the cyberspace to political participation process in China, which has long been depressed and controlled tightly by the authoritarian state; second to discuss or to forecast the possible prospect of political participation process in China and its potential effects on the whole political development process.

Given my background in political science and the limitation of thesis length, though the academic landscape of my selected subject is very broad and multidisciplinary, I would like to penetrate into this study primarily from the perspective of political science, and concentrating on the specific subsection of political participation process study. In my whole study, I would combine corresponding political science theories with some other social science theories, first to give a very brief and theoretical analysis of the concept and phenomenon of "cyberspace" from a relatively ubiquitous viewpoint. I then primarily engage in case studies by concentrating and stressing the practical situation and process of China's

Internet and political participation, discussing the effects and influences brought by cyberspace to political participation and making relevant evaluation and estimation. This study would primarily involve such theories as: the public sphere theory, the civil society theory, and the political participation theory.

Research questions could be summaries as follows:

- Relationships between cyberspace, public sphere, and civil society;
- Primary characteristics of the political environment and the political participation process in contemporary China;
- How the public discussion and public behavior taken in cyberspace affect the political participation process and to what extent;
- How the political system and institution reacts and regulates cyberspace and the political actions occurring or originating in it;
- Estimate the prospect for political participation in China and try to map out its potential and possible influences to the whole political development process.

1.3 Methodological framework and data collection

As mentioned above, because the main purpose of this study is to test such hypothesis that the newly-rising cyberspace in China could structurally challenge the monopoly of political power by the authoritarian state and fundamentally improve the quality of citizen's political participation process, so the primary and most important methodology applied in this study is the deductive approach and method. However, in order to supply and construct a solid theoretical basement for the deductive analysis and the evaluation of the social and political realities, the inductive approach and method is also indispensable. I would combine both approaches and methodological choices in my thesis while the deductive research is more important.

I intend to select two public forums to do case studies as the primary analytical part of my research. The membership of one public forum is very specific while the other's membership is scattered and broad. These could be viewed as two typical representatives of public forums concerned with public interests and public debate (at least in the context of contemporary China). Thus, because of this demarcation standard given the membership component, they are also respectively corresponding to the two layers of political participation, the direct layer and the indirect layer, which is scaled by actions taken by citizens to participate in politics and public affairs.

In order to do case study, I would apply the following methods: (1) participatory research, for example, I intend to not only observe but also participate into discussions in both forums, trying to view how online discussions initiate, develop and finally affect Chinese netizens' political perceptions, attitudes and behaviors; (2) interview research, I have done interviews with 33 different forum members when doing the case study of the HBVer forum. This is helpful to get more data and information about some silent IDs' personal feelings and cognitions; (3) documentary research (content analysis), this is the most important and primary way of my case study, aimed at documenting and analyzing relevant discourse posted in the forums.

I use both primary and secondary data to do the research and try to incline more to the former. The primary data is primarily used when doing the case studies and could be collected through analysis and summarization of online content and interviews with specific Internet users. The secondary data mainly serves to supply basic fundamental information and fundamental theoretical context.

1.4 Previous research

Studies of the Internet in China have mainly focused on three aspects: the physical networks, mechanisms of state regulation, and political impact of information technology. Among which intense interests are concentrated on the third aspect, that whether the Internet could help to democratize China. For example, Geoffrey Taubman argues that the Internet will reduce the influence of the party-state over the ideational and organizational character of China's domestic affairs.¹ A recent article by Eric Harwit and Duncan Clark, while focusing on political control of the Internet in China, draws attention to the potential for independent group formation in light of the new technological tools.² In a book based on eight state case studies, which include China, about Internet's impact on authoritarian regimes, Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas challenge the conventional wisdom which assumes that authoritarian regimes have fallen around the world, while the power of the microchip has risen.³

All the writers have contributed to form such conclusion, that "in the short run, political controls will remain schizophrenic as the value of an open network conflicts with conservative political philosophies and as the nature of the Internet's audience makes it an unlikely tool for precipitating

¹ Geoffrey Taubman: A Not So World-wide Web: the Internet, China and the challenges to nondemocratic rule, *Political Communication*, Volume 15, Issue 2, 1998, pp 255-272

² Eric Harwit & Duncan Clark: Shaping the Internet in China: evolution of political control over network infrastructure and content, *Asian Survey*, May/June 2001, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp 377-408

³ Shanthi Kalathil & Taylor C. Boas: *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: the impact of the Internet on authoritarian rule*, Washington, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003, pp 1

socially disruptive forces”.⁴ This conclusion is highly instructive to my thesis, which will benefit the empirical research on the actual uses of the Internet in China.

1.5 Disposition of the research

Except introduction and conclusion, this thesis contains three parts. The first part is the theoretical review and preparation, which is composed of three parts: conceptualization of the cyberspace from the perspective of political participation, expatiation of the relationship between cyberspace and public sphere, and accurate definition of the political participation concept in China context. The second part is intended first to give a brief introduction of the development situation of the Internet in China, and second to sum-up the current state of Internet regulations, especially the online content regulation in China. The third part is the most central part — the case study part. The case study is divided into two parts, dealing with each case study where I first outline the background and structure of the two public forums and then analyze their online contents and activities, etc. I also compare the two public forums’ different characteristics. The conclusion part is intended to give a more detailed and nuanced evaluation and estimation. First, I generalize the cyberspace’s impact on political participation process in China from four aspects. Second, I make a summarization of cyberspace’s influence on the whole political development prospect and democratization process in China.

2. Theoretic Review and Background

2.1 Cyberspace and public sphere

2.1.1 The concept of cyberspace

The word of “cyberspace” originated and was firstly applied by the author William Gibson in his science fiction novel *Neuromancer* to depict a space where “individuals could directly connect their nervous systems to a global computer network referred as the matrix and experience of virtual reality”.⁵ Since Gibson’s seminal novel, the word cyberspace has been gradually “wrested free of its futuristic, dystopian moorings and generally been used to describe emerging computer-mediated communication and virtual reality technologies.”⁶ Both allow people to interact with other people or with computer simulated worlds.

⁴ Eric Harwit & Duncan Clark: Shaping the Internet in China: evolution of political control over network infrastructure and content, *Asian Survey*, May/June 2001, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp 408

⁵ Strate, Jacobson & Gibson: Introduction, pp 2, in Strate, Jacobson & Gibson (eds): *Communication and Cyberspace: social interaction in an electronic environment*, Cresskill, Hampton Press, 1996

⁶ Rob Kitchin: *Cyberspace: the world in the wires*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1998, pp 2

According to Strate, there exist many different definitions of cyberspace, some viewing it as a fictional construct, other as imaginary but in development, other as real and present. Some equate cyberspace with virtual reality, other with the electronic storage and transmission of information, or with computer-mediated communication, or with communication over computer networks. Some see cyberspace as an individual conceptual space, others as a product of social interaction.⁷

I would like to incline more to and apply the group of definitions which view the cyberspace as real and present, as communication over computer networks, and as a product of social interactions. This definition is more pertinent to my thesis topic, the social impact of modern technology, or how online activities and discourse affect and reinvent offline politics and polity.

2.1.2 Public sphere as an analytical concept

Even though the history of public sphere could be traced to the ancient Greek, and academic dissertations about this concept were initiated in the 18th century, I would apply the profound formulation about this term contributed by Habermas, who is the first to detailedly describe and analyze the development process of public sphere itself. According to Habermas:

“By ‘the public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspaper and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere.”⁸

The concept itself is very clear to understand and apply to analyze some relevant phenomena. There are two different implications of the words of “public sphere”. The first one is applied in a specific sense as the shortened reference for the “bourgeois public sphere”, which is concerned with some specific

⁷ Strate, Jacobson & Gibson: Introduction, pp 4, in Strate, Jacobson & Gibson (eds): *Communication and Cyberspace: social interaction in an electronic environment*, Cresskill, Hampton Press, 1996

⁸ Habermas: The Public Sphere, pp 116, In Golding & Murdock (eds): *The Political Economy of the Media*, Volume II, Cheltenham, 1997

phenomena beginning in the political and social life in late 17th century England and 18th century France. Such bourgeois public sphere came into being with the rise of market economy, capitalism and bourgeoisie. It is the main research subject of Habermas' *Structural transformation of public sphere*.⁹ The second implication of "public sphere" could be understood from a broader sense, which indicates a ubiquitous category and some universal phenomenon, among which the bourgeois public sphere is a typical genre and a variant type. Habermas himself also use this concept in this sense in relevant writings.¹⁰

Because the thesis focus is targeted on the cyberspace and its impact on political participation process in contemporary China, I prefer to use the term of "public sphere" as an "analytical concept", the second implication of this concept, which views public sphere as a social mechanism existing between the public authority and the private citizens. The main function of this mechanism is to form public opinion through ideally unrestricted communication and rational-critical discussion.

My definition of the public sphere can be summarized in five aspects:

- First, the basis of public sphere's existence is the separation of society and state.

The main purpose of public sphere is to adjust the relationship between state and society in order to impel the state to protect and guarantee common interests of the whole society. Thus, the society must be autonomous from the state to a certain extent. It is only in such a separated domain that the "private individual" could become independent from public authority and then establish a "public sphere", which concerns with common interests transcending purely personal interests. Otherwise the political state would be pervasive and intrusive in every corner of the social life and able to easily infringe upon the society.

- Second, public sphere is a domain accessible to all in principle.

According to Habermas, the ideal type of bourgeois is "in principle inclusive". That means, even the public might be exclusive in some cases, "it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique. In the public sphere, "everyone had *to be able* to participate".¹¹

- Third, the majority of public sphere's participator is the "public body" composed of private citizens.
- Fourth, the main function of public sphere is to form rational-critical consensus and public

⁹ Philip C. C. Huang: "Public Sphere"/"Civil Society" in China?: The Third Realm between State and Society, *Modern China*, Volume 19, No. 2, April 1993, pp 216-217

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Jurgen Habermas: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1989, reprinted 1996, pp 37

opinions through unrestricted discussion and polemics.

- Fifth, the operation of public sphere relies heavily on effective media which could guarantee sufficient communication of its participators—private citizens.

We could then conclude that public sphere is a domain which possesses the following characteristics: *publicity, accessibility, autonomousness and criticismness*.

Publicity means public sphere is based upon an unblocked medium which could guarantee the sufficiency of participators' communication, discussion and interaction.

Accessibility means public sphere must be accessible and open to all in principle, which make sure that every private person has equal right to participate into public debate and emit their opinions.

Autonomousness means public sphere is located and constructed in the autonomous space from the power authority. The most primary task of this independent public sphere is to output and form systematical, rational and common public opinions.

Criticismness means public body composed of private persons presents a resistant and critical stance to the public authority and the public policies in order to form critical and rational consensus which aiming at affecting public decisions.

2.1.3 Relationship between the cyberspace and public sphere

This section severs to answer such question that whether the newly rising cyberspace is the relevant reflection of public sphere in the virtual world.

Something about the characteristics of CMC (computer-mediated communication) must be put forward firstly. As a product of information technology, CMC is certainly different from other existing media of communication. It challenges greatly the balance of power between publishers and consumers. Television, radio, newspapers and magazines are all “push” or “one-to-many” media which pump product at the public whether consumers want them or not; whereas CMC is a “pull” medium or “decentralized” – consumers are also “producers” and can decide for themselves whether they want to receive what the publishers are offering. In addition, in cyberspace it is easy, fast and relatively inexpensive to produce many copies and to redistribute information.¹²

Now, if we use the functional configuration to testify the structural ecology of the cyberspace, we

¹² Chris Toulouse & Timothy W. Luke: Introduction, pp 4, in Chris Toulouse & Timothy W. Luke (eds): *The Politics of Cyberspace*, London, Routledge, 1998. Also see, Rob Kitchin: *Cyberspace: the world in the wires*, Chichester, John WILEY & Sons Ltd, 1998, pp 13

will easily find that this newly-rising virtual reality could be looked upon as reflection and reconstruction of the “bourgeois public sphere” in the information age, while its participators have changed from the well-educated bourgeoisies to the new generation of *neuromancers*.

However, this does not mean that I equate cyberspace totally with public sphere, on the contrary, the activities and discourse occurring in cyberspace are more numerous than that occurred in public sphere. But at least some part of the cyberspace could be viewed as reflection and construction of the real world in the virtual space, whose activities and discourse is not only bound to the online world, but also pointed to the real world, and especially public affairs and public issues of the human being society.

Then I will discuss whether the cyberspace overlaps to the ideal type of public sphere in accordance with the five characteristics outlined above.

- First, the separation between state and society.

The society here means the “civil society” as a counterpoint to the “political state”.

It is argued by Habermas that the development of state bureaucracy and the expansion of power authority directly led to the eclipse of public sphere, and gradually eroded the space of civil society. However, the information media revolution and the rising of cyberspace are toppling down the pyramid of centralism institutions little by little, which is reshaping the re-separation of state and society from following two aspects:

First, it is very difficult for the traditional “Leviathan” state bound with colossal administrative apparatus to react quickly when facing relevant challenges brought by the cyberspace. For example, Nguyen and Alexander argue that although nation-states still exist, they are progressively losing control over the citizens because cyberspace is undermining politics through the availability of information and allowing people to by-pass the gatekeepers and directly access information.¹³ Thus, it is no longer possible for the state to take tightly control over citizens’ communication with the traditional way, some power vacuum is naturally formed and objectively facilitating the re-separation between state and society.

Second, as talked about by several researchers, the new information technology has to some extent deconstructed the three-dimensional meanings of time and space.¹⁴ Compared to the traditional “state” and “society”, the society faced by citizens and the public in the information age is increasingly getting generalized and globalized, which naturally loosens the tight control of the state.

¹³ Thu Nguyen and Alexander: The coming of cyberspacetime and the end of polity, pp 99-124. In Shields (ed): *Cultures of Internet: virtual spaces, real histories and living bodies*, London Sage, 1996

¹⁴ Rob Kitchin: *Cyberspace: the world in the wires*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 1996, pp 15

- Second, a space accessible to all in principle.

Accessibility is the most fundamental characteristic of the web and cyberspace. With relevant knowledge and skill of how to “surf the web” and the necessary technological equipments, anyone can enter and ramble in cyberspace.¹⁵ The web is opening the gate to every potential user with peerless inclusiveness and accessibility. There is even such a discourse to describe the accessibility characteristic of the web that “no one knows whether you are a dog or a human on the Internet”. In a word, cyberspace has made the accessibility principle to the largest extent with its technological convenience. The accessibility in principle to all is the most prominent structural characteristics of the cyberspace.

- Third, the participators of public sphere as private persons.

The information technology could not only make information within the whole world available to its users, but also be helpful to construct the independent selfhood of the public. Every netizen in different communities in the cyberspace is neither a practitioner of a certain profession nor a consumer of a specific commodity, but more inclined to be a “private person” with his or her own personality and identity.¹⁶ Once in cyberspace private persons reach and form a consensus about their common interests, it is no longer the “personal will” from the perspective of mass psychology but the “public spirit” originated by Rousseau from the perspective of political science instead.

Certainly, it should be admitted that not all online communities composed by private persons are concerned with “common interests”, however, cyberspace still makes it more convenient and as unrestricted as possible for those concerned with public problems to advance their private and diversified opinions in front of the whole public.

- Fourth, to facilitate unrestricted criticism and form consensus.

Compared with other “spaces”, the cyberspace supplies a more ideal debate and polemic environment for its participators, which facilitates netizens’ activities such as debating on public interests, criticizing authority and forming consensus. For example, cyberspace could sufficiently guarantee participators’ anonymity in public discussion. Almost all kinds of congenital personal information such as color, race, nationality, age and gender could be effectively shielded according to the users’ wills. It is helpful to eliminate the established bias and discriminations toward some of these factors and then create a more equal platform for debate and criticism.

This nearly unrestricted polemic environment could benefit participators to deploy criticism and

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp 3

¹⁶ Tim Jordan: *Cyberpower: the culture and politics of cyberspace and the Internet*, London, Routledge, 1999, pp 65-73

discussion in an unfettered sense and thus finally reach a rational consensus after ardent polemics.

- Fifth, availability of sufficient medium.

It is not an exaggeration that we could view the communication medium of the cyberspace – the computer network structure hitherto – as the most ideal medium of public sphere, if compared to all its predecessors such as cafes, salons, newspapers, magazines, radios and televisions.

The most widely discussed computer network, the Internet, were formed in the 1960s and early 1970s through the cooperation between the U.S Department of Defense and several research institutions. Computers were linked together via DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Program Agency) to form the first network -- Arpanet in the world, which allowing for access to each site's computers.¹⁷ This primordial network not only enabled people to use the same central computer by exchanging commands and results with the computer interactively, but also provided a channel of communication between humans and humans through the building of electronic systems.¹⁸ In addition to the electronic mail (e-mail), which is asynchronous (messages are stored and need not be read at the time of receipt), other forms of CMC include synchronous chat (text exchanged "live" as in a telephone conversation), and computer bulletin boards which allow for interchangers among many different users (later variations include the computer conference, the mailing list, discussion list or listerv, and the newsgroup).¹⁹

Through all these forms of interconnections among different computers, the users of these computers could actively and easily get involved and take part in the public debate in the cyberspace, which is a very typical public sphere in the information age.

As a summary of the above analysis, I argue that cyberspace is to a large extent overlapped to the ideal type of public sphere, which possesses following properties:

- *Accessibility*: the Internet is accessible to all in principle as a normal public sphere in the real world. The only admittance requirement is surf skill and the communication equipment.
- *Anonymity*: the only thing could be identified and recognized on the net is the "code" (such as ID or log in name) enacted by the user him or herself. It could be either real or fictive according to the user's own will and decision.
- *Equality*: because of the "anonymity" or the "virtuality", communication in the cyberspace could reduce differences among net users caused by differences of status and identities in the

¹⁷ Steve G. Jones: Introduction, pp 3, in Steve G. Jones (ed): *Cybersociety: computer-mediated communication and community*, London, Sage, 1995

¹⁸ Howard Rheingold: *The Virtual Community: homesteading on the electronic frontier*, New York, Addison Wesley, 1993, pp 88

¹⁹ Strate, Jacobson & Gibson: Introduction, pp 8, in Strate, Jacobson & Gibson (eds): *Communication and Cyberspace: social interaction in an electronic environment*, Cresskill, Hampton Press, 1996

real world to the lowest extent, which makes every netizen as equal as possible before the Internet.

- *Participativeness*: netizens could apply either synchronous or asynchronous means of communications to participate in both the single to single communication such as online chat and group participation such as discussion on BBS.
- *Limitlessness*: the communication in the cyberspace is beyond any limitations of time and space.

2.2 Political participation process in the China context

2.2.1 Definition of political participation

Political participation is a very important segment in the whole political system. Though there are different kinds of definitions of “political participation” aimed at delineating different dimensions of this process, most of them are based on a very general definition applied by many political scientists when they undertake specific research. Political participation could be viewed as “those legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and /or the action that they take”.²⁰

Though this definition is very famous and widely used, as gradually going deeper into the core of the thesis problem, it is necessary to develop this general definition in a more nuanced manner so as to make it more suitable to this thesis. To some extent, above definition is more applicable to democratic regimes rather than authoritarian regime like China.

In democratic regimes, competitive elections are authentically guaranteed by institutions and constitutions. Ordinary citizens can practically make officials listen to and care about their opinions and thus finally affect the process of policy-making through different kinds of means, among which the most important are voting and campaign activities.

In authoritarian regimes, though political participation can be similar to that in democratic regimes, for example, the direct elections for village leaders in grass root level and the limited direct elections for the People’s Congress deputy in the Chinese case, the political system in the party-state is still closed than open as most administrative positions are monopolized by the party through designating officials according to the party’s decisions instead of people’s direct voting and election. Under such condition, “institutional settings not only block the way for popular demands to reach elite but also deprive citizens

²⁰ Verba, Nie & Kim: *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven Nation Comparison*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp 1

of any possible weapons to make elites listen to their opinions”²¹, participation is similar to that in democratic regimes only on the surface as “they are all organized by the regime to mobilize the support of the general populace, rather than utilized by citizens to express their opinions to authority. Mass participation in those societies is at best suspect and at worst a hoax”.²²

As a result, above definition should be revised in accordance with some characteristics of contemporary China’s political environment, through assimilating more contents and dimensions into the vested category.

From my point of view, political participation in China is not only bound to directly influence “the selection of governmental personnel and /or the action that they take”, though this is a very important content of political participation process in every kind of regime. It could also be broadened from the behavior (or direct) layer of participation to the psychological layer (or indirect). These indirect means of political participation are viewed as “communication” factor by some political scientists, which includes such activities as “keep informed about politics, send messages of support to political leaders when they are doing well, send protest messages to political leader then they are doing badly, engage in political discussion, inform others in my community about politics, make my views known to public officials, write letters to the editors of newspaper”, etc.²³

So, we could further conclude that political participation process contains at least two layers in China: the behavioral/direct layer aims at practically and directly affect policy-making process of the government, and the psychological/indirect layer concerns with broadly involved and engaged in politics in more dimensions than solely affecting policy-making. The former layer consist of the primary content and dimensions of political participation process in democratic regimes with the guarantee of constitutional system and elaborated institutional settings, while the latter layer is more applicable in some transitional authoritarian regimes like China, which reflecting the paradox of ordinary citizens’ spontaneous interests toward public and political issues, and the difficulties of directly and authentically affecting government’s policies.

2.2.2 Characteristics of political participation in China

As discussed above, the general definition of political participation should be revised and elaborated upon to better suit the particularities of China’s political system and environment.

²¹ Tianjian Shi: *Political Participation in Beijing*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997, pp 2

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Milbrath & Goel: *Political Participation: How and Why do People Get Involved in Politics*, Chicago, Rand McNally, 1977, pp16

The first aspect is the changes of political participation process. With the embedment of economic reform since 1978, not only the economical system but also the socio-political system has undergone great changes, among which the most prominent is the emergence of “civil society” in China. It could be understood from three points: first, though the state still manipulates the primary resource and material, the allocation process has gradually presents a pluralistic trend; second, with this trend, civil and individual independence has been relatively enlarged, such as the weakening tendency of the organizational and identity restrictions upon individuals, the increasing respects of civil rights, for example, property right, freedom of speech and privacy, etc; third, with the development of the new social power and individual rights, series of NGOs and NPOs in economic, social and cultural spheres have become important social bodies that could not be ignored by the state.²⁴

It is undeniable that these above trends and the emergence of civil society make the authoritarian institutions become slightly flexible, and create some opportunities for individuals who find their new status as a citizen to participate in politics that was long monopolized and manipulated by the state.

The second aspect is the complex dimensions of political participation process in China, which could be viewed from three dichotomies of political actions: legal/illegal, ordered/disordered, institutionalized/uninstitutionalized. The three dichotomies are similar to some extent, because they are all reflections of the above mentioned paradox, that ordinary citizen’s spontaneous will to participate in politics and the regime’s intention to utilize political participation as social mobilization tools. Although the second dichotomy is the official discourse in contemporary China which are most often mentioned and used in the report of the 16th Party Congress, I would like to utilize the third dichotomy because it is more value-neutral while the other two are to some extent value-laden. What is more, China is now a transitional regime though the political system is rather stable. In such a transitional political ecology, the scarcity and ambiguity of institutions are very common phenomena, especially the political participation institutions. It is necessary to point out here that the boundary between institutionalized and uninstitutionalized is rather blurred than distinct because of the scarcity and ambiguity of current institutions. Uninstitutionalized political participation here is defined as actions taken by citizens to participate in order to solve the problems of institutional ambiguity, petrification, immaturity and scarcity. Such actions could be both constructive and deconstructive under different kinds of context and situation.²⁵

²⁴ Mingming Chen: Comparative Modernization, Civil Society and Neo-institutionalism (in Chinese), *Strategy and Administration* (Zhanlue yu guanli), July/August, No. 4, 2001, pp 114

²⁵ Jiangshan Fang: Uninstitutionalized Political Participation (Chinese), Beijing, the People Press, 2000, pp 37-38

As a conclusion, political participation in China is a very complex and variational process even though the whole political system is rather rigorous and stable. On one hand, the party-state wants to totally organize and manipulate the whole process of participation in an “ordered” manner so as to keep societal stability and to grasp power. But as China has transformed from the communist totalitarian regime to a developmental authoritarian regime with the process of economic reform and open-up, it is getting more and more difficult for the state to keep political participation totally controlled. On the other hand, the subject of political participation, private and ordinary citizens, who find out their independent selfhood through the complexities of economic life and the emergence of civil society, are suspicious of and negative to the manipulated and ordered political participations. But that does not mean that they are apolitical as seemingly, on the contrary, many citizens try to get involved and engaged in politics through some uninstitutionalized ways in a much broader sense of political participation than just aiming at affecting policy-making process.

3. The Internet in China

This part is intended to give a brief introduction and assessment of the development situation of the Internet and the current state of Internet regulations in China.

3.1 Internet development in China

The development of the Internet in China is very hopeful and optimistic at least in the quantitative sense, given the fast and stable development since 1997, which could be manifested by following statistic data. According to reports by CNNIC (China Internet Information Center), the numbers of Internet users and computers connected to Internet in China by July 2005 have respectively reached 103 millions and 45.6 millions while the corresponding data in October 1997 were just 620,000 and 299,000. The numbers of registered domain names under CN and Websites reached 622534 and 677500 by 2005 July, while the corresponding data in October 1997 were 4066 and 1500.²⁶

It is important for the following analysis to bear in mind the composition of Internet users (netizens) and their behaviors online. If not specially pointed out, relevant data are all quoted from the most updated report of the CNNIC issued in July 2005.

(1) Netizens’ structural characteristic: most netizens are male (59.6%), unmarried (59.0%), under 35

²⁶ See CNNIC: *China Internet Development Statistic Report* (1997, October), pp 1-2, and *China Internet Development Statistic Report* (2005, July), pp 5-7, download address for both reports: <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/index/0E/00/11/index.htm>

years old (81.3%) and with below-undergraduate education degrees (71.1%).²⁷

(2) Netizens' purpose of surfing Internet: most Chinese netizens use the Internet for relaxation and entertainment (37.9%), acquiring information (37.8%), studying and browsing knowledge (10.3%). Other purposes' portions are relatively smaller, all below 10%.²⁸

(3) Netizens' frequently used Internet services & functions: the ranges of eight hot Internet services are: e-mail box (91.3%), news browsing (79.3%), search engines (64.5%), non-news webpage browsing (57.2%), online music and download (45.6%), synchronous communication (44.9%), forum/BBS (40.6%), online film/TV and download (37.8%).²⁹

It should be stressed here that the portion of forum/BBS services has swiftly grown from 20.8% in the January 2005 report³⁰ to 40.6% in the July 2005 report, which to some extent shows the increasing importance of the forum/BBS service in Chinese cyberspace.

3.2 Internet regulations in China

Before looking at the current state of Internet regulation in China relevant to the thesis topic, a basic point should be noted here in order to give a very general picture of the whole situation. There is a paradox that the Chinese party-state encourages development and spread of the Internet and information technology on the one hand, while on the other hand believing that it can monitor and censor activities and information flows in cyberspace that it sees as “destabilizing, dangerous or unhealthy”.³¹ Such paradox is forged by the CCP regime's historical approach to modernization and development philosophy, which itself has warranted volumes of exposition,³² that on one hand it seeks modernization (which is equated with economic growth and development to a large extent) rather than democratization as the most important measurement of good governance and primary source of legitimacy, on the other hand the most fundamental and ultimate purpose of the regime is to always to keep the monopoly of absolute or at least authoritarian power with any means and at any cost.

Owing to the above paradox of both modernization philosophy and internet regulation strategy, the Chinese state employs and administrates the Internet and ICTs from an instrumentalist and pragmatic point of view. Thus, relevant laws about Internet infrastructure construction and Internet use regulation

²⁷ CNNIC: *China Internet Development Statistic Report* (2005, July), pp 63-64

²⁸ *Ibid.* pp 77

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 85-86

³⁰ CNNIC: *China Internet Development Statistic Report* (2005, January), pp 17

³¹ Gudrun Wacker: The Internet and censorship in China, pp 58, in Christopher R. Hughes & Gudrun Wacker (eds): *China and the Internet: Politics of the digital leap forward*, New York, Routledge Curzon, 2003

³² Shanthi Kalathil & Taylor C. Boas: *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The impact of the Internet on authoritarian rule*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003, pp 14

could be primarily classified in to two categories:

Many of Internet laws and regulations are intended to benefit Internet users, such as measures protecting consumers by governing online trading in pharmaceutical (*the Provisions of Internet Pharmaceutical Information and Service Management*³³) and online educational services, or upholding intellectual property rights and individual privacy. In this respect, regulation in China is not so different from that found in other countries or democratic regimes,³⁴ implying that the CCP regime sees the Internet as a typical symbol of “modernity” and “modernization” initiated in the developed Western world and through application of which could advance the regime’s economic growth and prosperity.

The above kinds of regulations reflect the commonness of Internet governance globally, which cannot be exclusively interpreted as efforts to stamp out political dissents and taboo contents. Those more directly related to questions of discourse control and content censorship are the locus of this thesis topic, which reflecting peculiarity of Internet rules in the Chinese authoritarian regime.

The government has promulgated series of laws to regulate and control the Internet content it perceives as “harmful” to stability and solidarity of the CCP regime. These laws and regulations could be roughly sorted into following respects: (1) organizing the infrastructure controlling the Internet; (2) controlling Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Internet Content Providers (ICPs); (3) restricting the distribution of news via Internet media; (4) flooding the Internet with approved and licensed websites, (5) filtering, blocking and censoring Internet content; (6) storing users’ data; (7) regulating public Internet outlets; (8) pushing semi-compulsory self-censorship.³⁵

The most important and relevant among these regulation principles for my thesis could be summarized as the idea that every web-user, whether individual or service provider or sponsor of electronic bulletin boards or chat rooms, is responsible for their actions online and for any content they access and send. Users can be punished for writing or distributing content that endangers “state secrecy” or security.

Since the list of contents that are banned from distribution and publication in the Chinese Internet gives a full overview of the government’s targets in controlling cyberspace, it is worth citing this in its entirety here:

³³ Internet version (Chinese) is accessible at: <http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/PI-c/611734.htm>

³⁴ Gudrun Wacker: The Internet and censorship in China, pp 61, in Christopher R. Hughes & Gudrun Wacker (eds): *China and the Internet: Politics of the digital leap forward*, New York, Routledge Curzon, 2003

³⁵ For this summarization, see: Tamara Renee Shie: The Tangled Web: does the Internet offer promise or peril for the Chinese Communist Party? *Journal of Contemporary China*, Volume 13, No. 40, August 2004, pp 530-536, and also Gudrun Wacker: The Internet and censorship in China, pp 61, in Christopher R. Hughes & Gudrun Wacker (eds): *China and the Internet: Politics of the digital leap forward*, New York, Routledge Curzon, 2003, pp 65

Any information that involves the following is forbidden:

(1) Contradicts the principles defined in the constitution

(2) Endangers national security, disclosed state secrets, subverts the government, destroys the unity of the state.

(3) Damages the honor and interests of the State.

(4) Instigates ethnic hatred or ethnic discrimination, destroy the unity of nationalities.

(5) Has negative effects on the State's policy on religion, propagates evil cults or feudal superstition.

(6) Disseminates rumors, disturbs social order, undermines social stability.

(7) Spreads lewdness, pornography, gambling, violence, murder, terror or instigates crime.

(8) Offends or defames other people, infringes upon the rights and interests of other people.

(9) Other contents that are forbidden by law or administrative regulations.³⁶

In short, these regulations constitute an effort by the Chinese government to make a more proactive Internet policy and to provide better instruments for influencing activities and discourse in cyberspace.³⁷

4. Two case studies

In this part, I would like to mainly apply case study method to make concrete analysis on how the Internet is used as a powerful communication tool by Chinese citizens to advance political participation and to promote the quality of this process. I choose two cases to analyze, or two public forums or BBS, more exactly speaking, to make my case studies.

The first reason I choose these two forums is that they are two typical representatives of the enormous public forums in China's cyberspace which are concerned more or less with public issues and topics. Such research demarcation does not mean that the two forums are completely irrespective and different, but more emphasis is paid on their structural and functional differences rather than the overlapped points.

The first one is a specific forum of Hepatitis B virus carriers (HBVers). Though there are a huge number of such kinds of forums engaged with specific topics and issues by specific groups of people, the HBV forum is worth paying more attention to for at least two reasons:

³⁶ This list can be found as Article 15 in *Provisions of Internet Information Service and Management*, accessible at: <http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/zhuanti/193663.htm>, (in Chinese), and Article 9 in *Provisions of Internet Bulletin Board System Service and Management*, accessible at: <http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/zhuanti/194618.htm> (in Chinese)

³⁷ Gudrun Wacker: The Internet and censorship in China, pp 65, in Christopher R. Hughes & Gudrun Wacker (eds): *China and the Internet: Politics of the digital leap forward*, New York, Routledge Curzon, 2003

(1) The concerns of HBV forum are of much public significance which show a resistant and critical stance to the current public policy and is intended to fight against the unfair discrimination, while most other specific forums are engaged with some “private” topics such as cooking, painting or film making, though in a public form;

(2) The members of the HBV forum is also special as being a rather weak and homogeneous group (*ruoshi qunti* in Chinese) without any formal and institutionalized channel to express their proper feelings and requirements in the real social and political life. The Internet supplies a very good chance for them to communicate with the “same” people and to take collective actions to protect their own rights.

The second forum is a more universal BBS whose membership and discussion topic is very broad, the *Tianya* (“skyline” in Chinese) BBS (<http://www.tianya.cn/>).

The primary reason of my choice is because it is the No. 2 Chinese BBS according to the most updated version of the Top 100 Chinese BBS list posted by an unofficial website.³⁸ The concrete rank of *Tianya* BBS fluctuates from No. 1 to No. 8 from time to time in all previous versions of this list, which to some extent shows that it is one of the most influential Chinese public forums, or “the online homestead of Chinese in the whole globe” (the welcome heading on its homepage). What is more, the *Tianya* BBS is very famous for its tolerance of broad topics and relatively free and vivid discussion styles, which is another reason for my choice. I will turn to and detailedly analyze this characteristic in the following sections.

Another reason to my choice is that they correspond respectively to the two layers of political participation process. The HBV’s forum is more inclined to the behavioral/direct layer while the *Tianya* BBS to the psychological/indirect layer. Such differentiation primarily rests with the two forums’ targeted memberships.

The HBV’s forum is undoubtedly much more specialized with a homogeneous group tightly concerns with their special interests, affairs and rights, which are the main contents of their forum. As a group with a very clear and single target – to resist and change the institutionalized discriminations of them, it is more possible to mobilize these members to take collective and active actions both online and offline to directly affect or try to affect the discriminative policies against them.

However, compared to the HBV’s forum, the membership of *Tianya* BBS is heterogeneous or

³⁸ Website homepage: <http://www.qihoo.com/forum/portal/topbbs/index.htm>. This website aims at giving assessment to the huge number of Chinese BBSes and finally publishing a Top 100 Chinese BBS list. It utilizes a comprehensive statistic means based on Alexa visit Statistics, google rank page and some other authoritative statistic methods to make this Top 100 list. Relevant data and the rank list are updated every three month.

scattered, so are these members' concerned interests and discussion topics. These members take relatively indirect way to engage and involved in politics through discourse instead of behavior and actions. In this sense, the members are to some extent like the citizens in the polis of Ancient Greek who gathered in the plaza to talk and debate on public issues and common interests. The Tianya BBS is just the virtual plaza in the Chinese cyberspace which supplies a "space" for a huge number of ordinary Chinese citizens who do not have sufficient channel to form and express their public opinions and make their voices resonated in the real political system. These members' discourse toward public affairs could be viewed as "*vox populi*" or "consensus direction" (*yulun daoxiang*) which aims at bringing public pressure on the government and authority in a universal sense rather than directly taking some practical actions to change public policy.

4.1 The Hepatitis B Virus carrier Case: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/>

4.1.1 Brief introduction of the HBV forum

There are 149, 003 members (registered User ID) in this forum until 2005, 29th November. It is very difficult to get the accurate number of membership since some persons register more than one User ID in that forum. The less-used ID is called "waistcoat" in Chinese Internet as a jargon. The average number of newly-posted articles (*tie zi* in Chinese) which includes topics and replies is around 3000 every day, among which the average number of newly-posted topics (*zhu tie* in Chinese) is around 270 every day. If not specially pointed out, data are acquired through nearly one month Internet observation. Most members of this forum are HBVers while there are also some non-HBVs such as journalists and relatives of HBVs.

This forum is composed of four primary discussion areas; each of them contains several discussion boards with specific content and topic. The first is "medical area" which is primarily concerned with medical knowledge about HBV. It contains seven boards such as "wardmate communication" (*bing'you jiaoliu*), "birth children" (*sheng'er yu'nü*) and "academic discussion", etc. The second is "social area" (*shehui qu*), which is of the most significant "public" and "political" meanings in this forum as it primarily concerns with vindicating civil rights of HBVs, disseminating scientific knowledge and information about HBV to the whole society, and the maintenance work of the forum. Five discussion boards are contained, which are: "HBVer's rights and interests" (*xiedaizhe quanyi*), "propaganda and dissemination of health and scientific knowledge" (*jiankang yu kepu*), "law consultation" (*fali zixun*), "career and creation" (*qian cheng chuang ye*) and "donation special board" (*juankuan zhuanqu*). The

third is “life area” which concerns mainly with personal communication among HBVers, offline parties, entertainments, IT discussion, English knowledge and health protection knowledge. It contains ten sub-boards. It is the most among the four areas, reflecting that though its concerning is not so “public” as the “social area”, it is the most popular and large area in the HBV forum. Some characteristic boards are “parties and friend-making”, “fat-chewing” and “soul fleet”. The fourth is the “administrative area” which deals with daily administration and operation work of the forum, and also supplies a very good function of documenting important issues in the development process of the forum. It includes six boards; three of them are accessible to all members, which are “forum bulletin”, “community construction” and “forum log”. The other three are only accessible to forum administrators or “board master” (*ban zhu*), which are “administrators communication”, “recycle bin” and “forum affairs administration”.

4.1.2 Online content observations and analysis

As content analysis and observations are the most important methods when researching Internet and its social impact, I select three boards of “HBVer’s rights”, “Propaganda and dissemination of health and scientific knowledge”, and “law consultation” in the “social area” to do observation and analysis. Because they are the most important boards that directly related to and concerned with “publicity”, so they could be viewed as the most worthy boards for this thesis’ research. However, it is not necessarily so to a large number of forum members as some of them even never visit these boards.

(1) “*HBVers’ rights and interests*” board

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/index.asp?boardid=1004>

The directive purpose and the welcome slogan of this board is: “Rally the HBVers to endeavor in order to eliminate the “HBV discrimination”, which is well reflected in the discourse and activities of this board.

According to an information compile article,³⁹ the main contents in this board could be classified into following sub-sections: 1) HBVers’ painfulness, which is a huge number of documentations and evidences of HBV discrimination in the real life; 2) the voice of media, which compiling together as much as possible recent reports on HBV discrimination in traditional mass media of television, newspapers and magazines; 3) seeking help, which are posted by many unbacked HBVers in the real life; 4) golden suggestions, which are very good ideas about fighting against discrimination; 5) actions of rights vindication, which documenting the actions taken by HBVers (both members and non-members)

³⁹ Accessible at: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1004&ID=344207>

to protect their civil rights; 5) painsworthy achievements, which summarizing some fruitions of anti-discrimination; 6) HBVers' sentiment and reflection, which are some emotional releases and expressions; 7) blacklist of mendacious medicine and pharmacy advertisement; 8) warm heart, which are some very affecting comforts and reanimations; 9) law and policy archive, which compiling the correlated laws and policies concerned with HBVers rights; 10) column of NPC & CPPCC, which paying attention to new agendas and overtures of eliminating HBV discrimination on the sessions of NPC and CPPCC; 11) commemorations of Zhou Yichao.⁴⁰

(2) "*Propaganda and dissemination of health and scientific knowledge*" board

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/index.asp?boardid=1010>

The purpose and targeted function of this board is just as its name implied, to disseminate scientific and health knowledge of Hepatitis B to both the HBVers and the whole society in order to make a solid basement for reciprocal understanding and communication. I classify its main contents into following aspects: 1) scientific knowledge and related information about Hepatitis B; 2) information of dissemination and propaganda activities held by the forum and its members in the real life, including initial discussions about basic ideas, scheming of the concrete enforcement and organization, and the feedback after the events; 3) some users' questions and discussions on the strategy to cope with employment and enrolment discrimination; 4) rational, profound and in-depth discussions on social discrimination against them, such as the origins and inbeing of discrimination and how to fight it in the long run.

(3) "*Law consultation*" board

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/index.asp?boardid=1018>

The purpose and function of this board is "To apply legal tool to protect our civil rights". In this board, forum members should be classified into two categories, one is composed of some professional lawyers and other law practitioners who are HBVers themselves, the other is made up of ordinary HBVers who suffered from employment and enrolment discriminations.

A very typical process is like follows: first discriminated HBVers that want to solve the problem with legal means go to the forum to pour out his or her story and experience and ask for professional advices and helps. After reading these materials, the professional members would analyze the concrete

⁴⁰ Zhou Yichao was a 2003 year graduate of Zhejiang University. On 23rd January, 2003, he entered for the examination of civil servant enrollment in Jiaxing City, Zhejiang Province. Though he had successfully passed both written examination and interview, he was still eliminated because of being HBVer. In great anger, he killed the one who was in charge of the employment process with a sharp knife, and seriously hurt another person in the same office on 3rd April, 2003. Zhou was sentenced death penalty on 4th September, 2003. He is viewed as "our hero" in the HBV forum.

situation and impart ideas and suggestions. In some specially meaningful and typical cases, these professional members (most of them are forum administrators and active members) would help through using their social relationships and offline social capitals. Meanwhile, a lot of information packages are available online in an article with the title of “Venture evaluation, financial assistance standard and legal information compile of anti-HBV discrimination litigation”⁴¹ in order to supply convenience for ordinary members to find relevant data, such as the basic litigation process, involved laws and codex, and the indictment templet, etc. Also, some other users would applause and cheer up when some litigations are in process and rendered online.

In a word, all these contents distinctly reveal that the forum is not only an archive of scientific knowledge and information about Hepatitis B, but also pays large attention to the public and social meanings and the behind societal problems caused by Hepatitis B and HBV discriminations. Qualified and in-depth public discussion has been undertaken there; moreover, it does not stagnate in the online world, on the contrary, it is well elaborated and oriented directly toward offline actions in the real political life, such as the propaganda of HBV knowledge to mass people, appealing to the governmental agencies and officials for changing current situations, contacting news media to seek to spread their stories, launching on HBV litigation through collective actions and efforts, etc.

4.1.3 Interviews and reflections

Except the online content observation and analysis, another important way to get data for the case studies is to make interviews with the forum members to get know more about their feelings and cognition about HBV discrimination and the forum’s political functions.⁴²

Through the content analysis and observation, I could only get some information and data about what has been documented on the Internet by those who are willing to “speak”. But as I have pointed out in the fieldwork report, the amounts of active members who speak and participate in online discussions very often are limited if compared to the whole membership of 140039. So in order to have a relatively full-scale picture of the forum’s function of improving the quality of political participation, it is of great significance to pay attention to those silent members as well. What is more, even for those actively involved members whose discourse could be easily found on the forum, it is still meaningful to communicate them in a more personal way such as face-to-face interviews or online chat in order to

⁴¹ Accessible at: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1018&ID=466665&page=1>

⁴² See fieldwork report for details of the interviews.

know more about their perceptions toward the anti-discrimination cause and the operation and prospect of the forum, which they do not necessarily post and reveal in the forum.

Thus, after the interviews, I get a lot of interesting information and reflections.

First, not everyone is interested in the public meanings of the forum. According to my interviewees, many members' interests and purpose to join the forum is just to find persons with similar background and to release their pressures and grievances, which are impossible or very difficult in the real life. For them, the most important function of this forum is supplying a "communication platform", not as my former anticipation that to engage in public discussion and seek to participate in politics.

Second, it is the quantitative minority of the forum members (probably 10% of the whole membership or less according to a rough estimation of a board master⁴³) to take the main obligation of taking action to practically change the whole group's plight in the real life, while the quantitative majority (the rest 90% or more) are more willing to wait and see to what extent they could benefit from others' actions. According to the above mentioned board master, they are the solid mass basement of the forum and also interested in get free ride.

Such findings are not strange at all, because there is always some distance between the original expectation and the final reality, my fieldwork is not an exception in this sense. As a result, more attention should pay to how the forum could change the real situation and the discrimination in the real political life.

4.1.4 Actions taken to fight against discrimination

In a word, their actions could be described as a process of mobilizing any available social capital, employing any possible means and grasping any potential chance to fight with the current discriminations both online and offline. It should be pointed out that the offline activities are more important given the forum's targeted functions and purposes of eliminating discriminations in order to change the 120 million HBVers' plight.

These actions could be classified as follows: (1) different legal means within the current institutional framework, which include signing on petitions both online and offline, organizing litigations to governmental agencies which discriminate HBVers in the employment process, contacting with deputies to NPC and CPPCC to express their opinions and discussing online about legislation work of relevant laws, such as the anti-HBV discrimination law and privacy protection law; (2) conversation and

⁴³ This board master is the respondent No. 1 of Category 2, see Appendix 2.

cooperation with other website and other mass media of television, newspaper and magazines; (3) propaganda and dissemination of scientific knowledge about Hepatitis B to the whole society and mass people; (4) setting up forum fund with members' voluntary donations.

It is not an exaggeration that great achievements have been acquired in every above area. Only the most important and characteristic accomplishments are documented and listed below.

(1) Legal means

One of the most meaningful achievements as collective actions taken and launched by the forum with political meanings is to organize 1611 members who leave their real names and residence identity numbers to put forward a request of review of unconstitutionality of the former *Medical Check-up Standard of Civil Servant Employment*. This happened in November 20th, 2003, while Zhou Yichao was sentenced death penalty two month before in September 4th in the first instance.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, another forum member Zhang Xianzhu whose forum ID is Songyue (meaning pine and moon in Chinese) had begun his litigation of the municipal Personnel Bureau of Wuhu, Anhui Province with the reason of this bureau's "violation of constitution" for he was similarly discriminated in the employment process as being a HBV carrier as Zhou's experience. Though this litigation was seemingly carried through solely by Zhang himself, it was actually a collective litigation instead. After Zhang released his suffering from discrimination in the forum, a lot of members came together in the virtual space to give counsels to Zhang. They finally decided to take up litigation means to protect their civil rights. According to Zhang, his role in this case is just to stand out while the other members are heroes behind the scene who really make the play successfully on to the public.⁴⁵ In this sense, this litigation is definitely a collective action which representing the 120 million HBVers voice and rights.

Both above incidents had significant outcomes.

Zhang finally recovered the litigation to the personnel bureau. Although it could be viewed as a strategically compromise of the state and government aiming at appeasing the angry HBVers hurt in Zhou Yichao Case, it is still of great emblematical meanings that an ordinary citizen could apply legal and constitutional tool to resist the arbitrary governmental agencies in an authoritarian regime like China. Maybe this is why that Zhang's case was listed in the top 10 constitutionality incidents in 2003 China, which were chose and judged by the Center of Constitution and Civil Rights at Tsinghua University.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ See Appeal for review of violation of constitutions in the name of the 120 million HBVers, 2003, Nov. 26th, the Beijing News (Xin Jingbao), accessible at: <http://www.thebeijingnews.com/news/2003/1126/2003112623637.htm>

⁴⁵ See: *The first HBVer law case is a collective litigation*, 2003, November. 26th, the Beijing News (Xin Jingbao), accessible at: <http://www.thebeijingnews.com/news/2003/1126/2003112622817.htm>

⁴⁶ Relevant information is accessible at: <http://bbs.hbvhbv.com/ispbbs.asp?boardID=1003&ID=316146>

On January 19th, 2005, more than one year after Zhou Yichao's death and Zhang Xianzhu's victory, the revised *General Standard of Medical Check-up of Civil Servant Employment (testing)* is formally enforced in China, Article 7 distinctly stipulates that only if the hepatic function is normal, HBV carriers could be employed as civil servants.⁴⁷ Though this change is not as satisfactory as HBVers expectation of only keeping hepatic function check-up in the whole process, it is of significant meanings as being initiated and affected by ordinary citizens' spontaneous appeal and action from below instead of political leaders' will from above. It could be viewed as not only a milestone in the anti HBV-discrimination field, but also declares the quiet but doubtless disenchantment of civil consciousness in the whole Chinese society.

(2) Conversation and cooperation with other mass media

In this filed, great efforts have been paid and the outcomes are also surprising.

The forum has already cooperated with CCTV and other local TV stations for many times to take part in different news shows, some among which are very popular programs, such as the "Tell Truth" (*shihua shishuo*), the "News Studio" (*xinwen yanboting*), the "Oriental Times" (*Dongfang Shikong*) and the "Social Documentation" (*Shehui Jilu*). And almost all video versions of these programs are available for download to PC through an interlinkages compile article in the forum. Until now, the number of available video programs is twenty-eight,⁴⁸ among which most were on CCTV, the national TV station in China.

Meanwhile, a lot of very famous and influential all-around newspapers and magazines, such as the Xinhua News Agency (*Zhang Xianzhu: from the challenger of discrimination to the propagandist of HBV knowledge*),⁴⁹ the People's Daily (*Why discrimination is hovering around*),⁵⁰ the South Weekly (*The boundless road of anti HBV-discrimination*),⁵¹ the New Beijing Newspaper (*Appeal for review of violation of constitutions in the name of the 120 million HBVers*),⁵² and the Yangcheng Evening Paper (*The HBV forum: re-emblazing the hope of life*),⁵³ etc, have reported successively the forum's characteristic members' stories and their relevant anti-discrimination activities and achievements, which making this issue more and more popular in the whole society and political agenda as well.

(3) Propaganda and dissemination of scientific knowledge

⁴⁷ Relevant information is accessible at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2005-01/20/content_2488123.htm

⁴⁸ This article is accessible at: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1010&ID=401320&page=1>

⁴⁹ This report is accessible at: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1004&ID=348713&page=1>

⁵⁰ This report is accessible at: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1004&ID=467230&page=1>

⁵¹ This report is accessible at: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1004&ID=509840&page=1>

⁵² This report is accessible at: <http://www.thebeijingnews.com/news/2003/1126/2003112623637.htm>

⁵³ This report is accessible at: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1004&ID=498159&page=1>

The forum has successfully organized several activities to propagandize scientific knowledge about HB which aims at eliminating the universal ignorance and misapprehension about HB and the prevalent prejudices, suspicions and hostility against HBVers among the whole society.

The most frequent and typical form of such activities is to post up slogans and banners in some public places, to distribute leaflets and brochures around hospitals, schools and plazas, and to hold relevant lectures in universities, etc.

There are also some other actions which are not as easy as above ones to operate and organize:

The first is the printing of a book with the title of *Conquering Hepatitis B*, which is published by the Orient Press. The writing of this book is directly organized by the HBV forum. The members of the HBV forum intend to appeal the whole society in the wish of conquering HB and especially the HBV discrimination under cooperation of the whole country instead of solely their own group. This book is composed of five chapters, which not only transmits knowledge and experience of how to defend and cure HB, but also reveals and criticizes varieties of social problems caused by HB and HBVer discriminations. It is clearly and strongly demonstrated and appealed that the Hepatitis B virus is the common enemy of our all instead of the carriers of it.

Another significant current activity is the successful publishing of the first commonweal advertisement about anti HBVer-discrimination in China. It occupies a full edition in the Oriental Current News (*Dongfang Jin Bao*) in December 1st, 2005, which is the first anniversary of the enforcement of non-discriminative article of the *Prevention and Cure Law of Infectious Disease*. The whole process of publishing is operated by the forum, which include initiating the idea, designing the concrete content and financing the ad-rate. This is also the first commonweal advertisement totally operated by civilian powers in China. The newspapers transferred this money to the Chinese Hepatitis Fund as they thought this is an action concerning with public interests.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, the forum also seeks to alleviate discrimination through getting in touch with different big corporations, especially influential multinational corporations. Some active members and board masters have gone to Shenzhen to take part in the proseminar of Asia Cooperate Social Responsibility. A board master who is in Shenzhen successfully applied two seats for the forum in the proseminar, which was only accessible to cooperates, brand trades and the third-party organizations before. This is the first time that CSR-Asia invites an Internet forum to take part in their seminar. Except taking part in seminars,

⁵⁴ See: *The first anti HBV-discrimination commonweal advertisement was born in China, which is initiated, designed and contributed by comrades in our forum*, accessible at: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1004&ID=519768&page=1>

they also held their own seminar with the title of “HBVers and social responsibility”. Though the number of participators is not very large as about 25, it included the executive president of the CSR-Asia, which to some extent shows that their activities have influenced some very important persons.⁵⁵

(4) Setting up forum fund

The organized setting and operation of the forum fund is a very distinct proof of its publicity and concerning with political activities. The fund is set up on the basis of voluntary donations from forum members. Those who are in charge of the concrete administrations of the fund detailedly publicize operations of the relevant accounts in the donation board every quarter.⁵⁶ Donations are used in mainly following aspects: 1) daily construction and maintenance of the forum because it is a purely public interests forum and does not have any advertisement income; 2) donation to some specific members whose plight are very urgent and need quick help, a very typical case is donating to a member suffering from liver carcinomatosis whose ID is *Businiaio* (the secular bird in Chinese) to do liver transplant operation;⁵⁷ 3) regular donations to specific issues, including propaganda issues and rights-vindicating issues; 4) to give money as encouragement to members with specific contributions, such as Zhang Xianzhu, and the amount is 2000 RMB.⁵⁸

4.2 **The Tianya BBS Case:** <http://www.tianya.cn/>

4.2.1 **Brief introduction of the Tianya BBS**

Tianya virtual community (Tianya BBS) was born in March, 1999, which is one of the primary operation items of the Hainan Tianya Online Internet Technology Ltd. With more than six years' development, it has developed from the initial 3 BBSs to one of the most famous and largest virtual community in China, possessing more than 300 public discussion boards and 210, 000 blogs. It is also one of the most popular information channels and online homesteads of Chinese netizens.⁵⁹ By June 2005, the number of registered user ID was 5.1 million, active ID number 2.3 million, and the highest synchronous online users' (including both registered ID and unregistered users, the latter could just browse while the former could both browse and “speak”) number reaches 85,000 persons at one time. The average number of posted articles is more than 8000 per day, 80% of which originated in Tianya

⁵⁵ See: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1010&ID=521685&page=1>

⁵⁶ For instance, see: *Reimbursement money for vindication and propaganda activities of the 4th quarter*, 2004, accessible at: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?BoardID=1008&ID=483595&replyID=&skin=1>

⁵⁷ See: *The proposal of launching donation to our comrade Businiaio*, accessible at: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?BoardID=5&ID=308566&replyID=&skin=1>

⁵⁸ See: *The compile article of all previous bounty to meritorious members in vindication and propaganda activities*, accessible at: <http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?BoardID=1008&ID=483592&replyID=&skin=1>

⁵⁹ *Brief introduction of Tianya community*, accessible at: <http://article.tianya.cn/tenya/intro/about.htm>

BBS, and the average number of daily replies reaches more than 900,000.⁶⁰

Compared with the HBVer forum, this public forum has a much broader membership, which covers all kinds of Chinese netizens. As a natural result and reflection of the complicated and multilayered components of the membership, the topics and focuses of this forum are very broad and almost all-inclusive.

4.2.2 Content observation and analysis

As I have mentioned, the Tianya BBS case is corresponding to the indirect layer of political participation according to my thesis design, because its membership is broad or *scattered*, so are its concerning topics and interests, which are the underlying reasons and factors of the relatively indirect discussion way and style. Thus, the case study of Tianya BBS concerns with to what extent discussions and discourse in this forum help to cultivate ordinary member's interests and enthusiasm toward political affairs and public issues, which could be accomplished primarily through documentary research method by doing media watch and content analysis. So in this section, I choose two specific discussion areas (*taolun qu*), the *Tianya by-talk* board and the *Guantian tearoom* board, which both concern with public and political topics to observe for a certain period, concentrating on focuses of their topics and the extent of penetration of discussions. Though the two boards are both concern with political issues and topics, they are not solely aiming at discussing politics but cover broader topics and aspects. The *Tianya by-talk* board is a forum for broad groups of people while the *Guantian tearoom* board attracts elites and intellectuals. Through a study of the two boards one can get a more comprehensive picture about the different discussion styles and their impacts in the Tianya BBS.

4.2.2.1 *The "Tianya by-talk" board*⁶¹

According to my observations and calculation, the recent average numbers of daily topics and replies in *Tianya by-talk* board are 665 and 22628 respectively. This to some extent demonstrates that discussion topics in this board are very huge and concern almost all kinds of popular social issues and current hotspots in China. Thus, what makes this board unique and meaningful is its discourse style and discussion way rather than covered topics. I primarily choose one issue that is highly imbued with political meanings, that the Harbin water pollution issue which happened on 21st November and was

⁶⁰ Relevant data is accessible at: <http://article.tianya.cn/2005/ad/forty.htm>

⁶¹ <http://www.tianya.cn/new/publicforum/articleslist.asp?stritem=free&idwriter=477526&key=810818485>

caused by a blast on 13th November at the PetroChina Factory in Jilin city, Jilin Province.

The primary reason to my choice is that it reflects both the shining prospect and the dim actuality of online discourse which is relevant to political issues, especially those with sensitive meanings. On one hand, the discussions and debates occurred in online communities could to some extent break down information monopoly of the government, which is one of the most common and effective means to keep political control of ordinary citizens in some developing countries like China. On the other hand, the discussions are tightly controlled and supervised because this issue is politically sensitive in contemporary China like the SARS case. Though the government was forced to reveal and open the information channel to the mass public under the pressure of *vox populi*, suspicious eyes and rigorous controls were never released but just converted into a more ulterior style.

According to calculation based on search engine within Tianya BBS (the key words are “Harbin” and “water pollution”), the total number of relevant topics is 107 from November 21st to 9th December. Most discussion is based on an analysis of content during the period from 21st November to 30th November: 97 topics were posted within this period, showing that relevant discussions are instantaneous rather than continuous and constant. Because of time constraints and the complexity of related data, it’s impossible to calculate the number of total replies so that I primarily choose some characteristic topics to observe the replies.

The 107 topics could be classified into three aspects according to their contents:

(1) Circulation of other media’s news report about information about pollution and the cutoff of the water supply. This could be viewed as background material for further discussions. Typical topics are: *The Songhua River is severely contaminated because of the PetroChina blast in Jilin*,⁶² *How the benzene empisons dirty the Songhua River (with pictures)*,⁶³ and *Let us know something about the nitrobenzene which contaminated the Songhua River*, etc.⁶⁴

(2) Unveiling some “facts” in Harbin during that period from personal views, which seeking to sketch out a more detailed and authentic picture for the rest people who are far away from that city. Typical topics are: *Worrying about my parents, do we need to move out Harbin*,⁶⁵ *Harbin under the curtain of night*,⁶⁶ and *Diary in panic (Harbin earthquake in my eyes)*,⁶⁷ etc.

⁶² <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=78704726&idArticle=408870&strItem=free>

⁶³ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=78704726&idArticle=408956&strItem=free>

⁶⁴ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=78704726&idArticle=414943&strItem=free>

⁶⁵ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=78704726&idArticle=412305&strItem=free>

⁶⁶ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=409746&strItem=free>

⁶⁷ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=395153&strItem=free>

(3) In-depth criticisms and reflections of this issue, which is the primary type of all topics, which contain four aspects:

3.1) Opinions and criticisms of the whole management of the water pollution crisis: *Is it not late to dig well when feeling thirsty?—the Harbin issue reveals the absence of crisis-management institutions.*⁶⁸

3.2) Censure to the honest and credit of governments and officials: *Doubt the government's honesty and credit in the Harbin water issue.*⁶⁹

3.3) Comment and discontent toward media's attitude and report to this issue: *Comparison of two news reports about the Harbin water pollution issue — I am totally shocked!!*⁷⁰

3.4) Caring and worrying about the health and safety of peasants who live in the catchment area of Jilin city: *Harbin is just a point while the Songhua River is a line.*⁷¹

However, the 107 topics are not the total amounts of topics because during the discussion period some very radical and sharp topics which offending discourse taboos have already been deleted by the board masters. What is available now is after severely self-censorship by forum administrations. Among the remaining topics, some are very special and of great significance, which are semi-blocked and set as “un-replied” but still could be read. That means these topics have more or less trespassed the potential forbidden zones of online discourse in the discussion process, but still be valuable and acceptable to remain from the opinion of forum administrators. According to my calculation, there are 31 such kind topics among the total 107 topics, thus the semi-block rate is around 28.9% in this case.

These blocked topics could be classified into two types according to a very interesting measurement, that some are immediately blocked after being posted while others are blocked subsequently after being discussed for some while.

For those immediately blocked, the content themselves are not problematic and sensitive at all or they would have been totally deleted rather than semi-blocked. For example, some of these contents are just transshipments of some published news reports and some very neutral knowledge about the hurt of the benzene pollution, such as: *Harbin cutoff water supply for four days to inspect and measure the water quality*⁷² and *Investigation group designated by the State Council strictly checks the Jilin blast and the Songhua River pollution.*⁷³ It is obviously that the board masters are afraid of the potential and further

⁶⁸ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=414928&strItem=free>

⁶⁹ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=415052&strItem=free>

⁷⁰ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=418903&strItem=free>

⁷¹ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=418732&strItem=free>

⁷² <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=0&Key=0&idArticle=388237&strItem=free>

⁷³ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?idWriter=0&Key=0&strItem=free&idArticle=426328&flag=1>

discussions would become very sharp and lead to severe criticisms to the governments and the CCP, which will cause attentions of web police in charge of supervising online discourse.

For those subsequently blocked, the problems are more likely happened in the discussion process. A very typical example is the different fates of two topics with same contents: *If the water pollution issue happened in the USA.*⁷⁴ The first copy of this topic was posted on November 25th at 11: 52. Though the accurate block time cannot be known, it couldn't be too much more than three hours and a half, which is the interval from publication to the last reply. The same topic was re-posted with same content in the next day at 3: 49 by another ID.⁷⁵ This time it luckily escaped from being blocked and could be replied until the time of writing. Such a distinction obviously tells that the content of the topic itself is not problematic even according to self-censorship standard of Tianya BBS, thus the problem more probably existed in the replies. After reading all the replies of both topics, I find that the most possibly problematic reply which directly caused the block of the first copy maybe the one which mentioned and implied that the power monopoly of the one-party system is the initial reason of the mismanagement of Harbin water issue.

As a very brief generalization and summarization, I find that:

First, the discussions are qualified to some extent given some very in-depth and rational criticisms and discourse which pointing out: (1) the problem is rooted in the whole political systems; (2) the Harbin water pollution issue is not an accident but reflect some underlying disfigurements and structural problems of the current party-state system; (3) the mass media's attitude when reporting the water pollution issue is a deceit and shame in front of the mass people.

Second, the speakers could to some extent express their feelings, opinions and discontents to the government and some senior leaders, which is definitely impossible in the real political life through any other kinds of mass media. So, if compared to the pervasive songs and praises of how the governments and leaders are concerned with people's interests and brave to correct the initial mistakes intended not to make the people worried, the discourse and discussions in the *Tianya by-talk* board is more critical and reflects the real thoughts and feelings of the mass people.

Third, we still need to admit that the discussions are not very active and hot if compared to some other topics which are also of political meanings in the same period and the same board. One example is the criticisms to the newly announced 2008 Beijing Olympic Games mascots design. From November 13th until the time of writing, there are totally 351 topics directly concerning with the mascot design in

⁷⁴ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=0&Key=0&idArticle=412533&strItem=free>

⁷⁵ <http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=0&Key=0&idArticle=415188&strItem=free>

the *Tianya by-talk* board.

Fourth, the primary reasons of such situation are: (1) it is rooted in the nearly rigorous censorship. As we have found that some topics, even not problematic at all, could be blocked. So these topics could not be replied, which caused many troubles and inconveniences to those who initially wanted to speak and debate; (2) though almost every ordinary citizen feel the ridiculousness and stupidity of government in the Harbin issue, not every one is interested in and dares to talk about its political meanings because the universal political atmosphere is still arbitrary and the state always keeps rigorous surveillance of the Internet discourse and content.

The above situation means that, on one hand, the online discourse could break down the information monopoly and the control of mass media manipulated by the party-state; on the other hand, such breakthroughs and changes are limited and strictly supervised by the state currently, and no hint is foreseeable that such dilemma should be solved in the near future.

4.2.2.2 *The “Guantian tearoom” board*⁷⁶

The basic tenet of this board is clearly indicated by the entrance direction: “the *Guantian tearoom* board seeks to become the best academic thought forum aiming at taking purely theoretical learning and idealistic discussion, and trying to make profound analysis and study about relevant topics and problems from the perspective of academic theories as well. It tries to incarnate the social responsibility of the intelligentsia through profound and rational idealistic communication and thus become the online homestead of the mass intellectual group.”⁷⁷

That means this board is concerned most with academic topics whose participants are usually scholars and intellectuals or those who take themselves as members of these two groups. Though it is not directly related to politics, some of its topics are about public affairs and public interests. The speakers there are proud of their roles as “public intellectuals” as independent from both the state and the “vulgar” (the apolitical and profit-seeking society).

According to my observation and calculation, the average numbers of daily topics and daily replies in the *Guantian tearoom* board are 101 and 1849 respectively. Its topics primarily contain followings aspects:

- (1) Film reviews, literature criticisms and reviews.

⁷⁶ <http://www.tianya.cn/new/Publicforum/ArticlesList.asp?strItem=no01&idWriter=477526&Key=810818485&Part=0>

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

(2) Theoretical reviews and academic essays, among which most are concerning more less with politics and political science, such as democracy, freedom of speech, liberalisms thoughts, etc.

(3) Issues about Chinese rural area, agriculture and peasants.

(4) Comments and analysis of hot social issues from theoretical and academic perspectives.

Then I will analyze the characteristics of the discourse style and the impacts of the *Guantian tearoom* board through comparisons with the *Tianya by-talk* board.

(1) The *Guantian tearoom* (GT) board is less popular than the *Tianya by-talk* (TB) board among all users of Tianya BBS. The targeted participants of the former are intellectuals while there are no specific requirements about that of the latter. The difference of popularity could be indicated by the average number of daily topics and replies of both boards: the respect number of topics and replies for the former are 101 and 1849 while the latter are 665 and 22628.

(2) As revealed by the great discrepancy of discourse amount between the two boards, it is easily to argue that the topics in the GT board are not as all-around and full-scale as that of the TB board, which could also be explained by the differences and demarcations between user's characteristics.

(3) The relatively narrower scale and less amounts of discussion topics of the GT board is just a neutral characteristic rather than a negative point, because there is no direct causality between quantity and quality, though in some cases enough quantity is a very important measurement of good quality. Moreover, in the GT board, the narrowness or the "concentricity" of topics and discussions even makes them more easily become embedded as it creates and supplies more conveniences for users to concentrate limited energies and expertise on some specific points in order to lay out more penetrating findings and more profound discussions.

(4) Thus, discussions in the GT board is more like academic seminars among congenial friends and colleagues with same professional interests and cause, while the TB board inclines more to an discourse market accessible to everyone if only he or she is willing to participate. Such difference does not mean and imply that there are any compulsory requirement and qualification for the GT board, but it should be admitted that getting actively involved and acceptable in the GT board does requires some professional expertise and academic talents.

As a brief generalization, both boards help to cultivate and improve ordinary citizens' enthusiasms toward public topics and political affairs from different aspects, which are decided by their different targeted contents and users. The TB board supplies a very good platform for mass netizens to express their opinions and to take part in online public discussions, while the GT board is designed for some

specific persons with specific expertise and skills to communicate with and discuss some profound topics. The relationship between the two boards is mutually supplementary rather than exclusive though there are some structural and fundamental differences between them.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Cyberspace's impact on political participation in China

On the basis of the above theoretical preparations, policy reviews and case studies, we could generalize the cyberspace's impacts and effects on political participation process in contemporary China from following four aspects:

1. It has broadened avenues and means of political participation.

The process and configuration of political participation not only concerns political and social aspects, but also deals largely with technological factors. Without sufficient information and communication technology, it is impossible to get responsive and effective political participation in any regime and any case. Thus, "cyberspace, by providing a new medium of communication, is thought to provide new space for political dialogue and democracy",⁷⁸ and supply new avenues and means for mass citizens to participate in political affairs. For example, in the Harbin water pollution case, if it hadn't been for the presence of cyberspace whose concrete carriers are huge BBSs, this topic could not have been talked publicly by ordinary citizens around the whole country. Though the relevant discussions and discourse are still under both rigorous surveillance outside the forum and severe self-censorship within the discussion board, we should admit that in the real offline world though chatting about this issue within a charmed circle is possible, it is very difficult to talk and discuss it in public and critical term like what was happening in the Tianya BBS boards.

2. It has advanced citizens' willingness and interests to become involved in politics and political participation through breaking down information monopoly.⁷⁹

For most authoritarian regimes like China, to influence people's political cognition and opinion through monopolizing information and utilizing mass media is the most common and effective means to keep political control of citizens.⁸⁰ Chinese government has always showed excellent skills and sufficient authorities in doing so; the typical ways taken by the regime are news censorship and filtration,

⁷⁸ Rob Kitchin: *Cyberspace: the world in the wires*, Chichester, John WILEY & Sons Ltd, 1998, pp 11

⁷⁹ For this point, see Geoffrey Taubman: A Not So World-wide Web: the Internet, China and the challenges to nondemocratic rule, *Political Communication*, Volume 15, Issue 2, 1998, pp 255-272

⁸⁰ Shanthi Kalathil & Taylor C. Boas: *Open Networks, Closed Regimes, the impact of the Internet on authoritarian rule*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003, pp 17-18

information blockage, ideological indoctrination, etc.

But the emergence and prevalence of the Internet is gradually breaking such monopoly, because “the content-saturated Internet can create conditions of ideational pluralism, defined as a situation in which multiple sources of ideas, images and news are widely accessible to the public.”⁸¹ Though Internet regulations in China aiming at controlling online discourse and activities have never been loosened, a lot of Chinese netizens still feel unprecedented freedom online and become optimistic about the political impacts of the Internet, which will advance their willingness and interests in getting involved in politics and taking political actions through different online and offline ways. Some empirical data could demonstrate this point. According to the 2005 Survey of Internet usage and impact in five Chinese cities, most interviews viewed the political impact of the Internet positively in five aspects: people will have better knowledge of politics (62.8 per cent), higher officials will be more aware of the common people’s views (60.4 per cent), government can better serve the people (55.3 per cent), people have more opportunities to criticize government policies (54.2 per cent), people have more political power (45.1 per cent).⁸²

3. It has guaranteed the quantity and quality of political participation.

With the increasing popularity of the Internet, multifarious virtual communities are rising at surprising speed in cyberspace.⁸³ These communities not only compartmentalize netizens into different groups according to their common interests and affinity rather than coincidence of location,⁸⁴ but also interlink them together with various electronic ways, such as mailing lists, the bulletin board system, newlists, etc.⁸⁵ Thus, it is getting easier for citizens with same values, backgrounds and interests in real life to get together and communicate with each other in the virtual cyberspace, which will ameliorate both the quantity and quality of political participation based on sufficient communications and effective interactions. Those willing to meet in virtual arenas and daring enough to air their discontent with social and political problems are definitely on the increase.⁸⁶ For example, in the Zhang Xianzhu’s litigation case, if it hadn’t been for the HBVer forum, those who actively involved in online discussions and offline organizations of litigation and propaganda could not even have had chances to know each other, not

⁸¹ Geoffrey Taubman: A Not So World-wide Web: the Internet, China and the challenges to nondemocratic rule, *Political Communication*, Volume 15, Issue 2, 1998, pp 257

⁸² Chinese Academy of Social Science: *Year 2005 Survey of Internet usage and impact in five Chinese cities* (English version), pp 97-99, download address: <http://www.wipchina.org/?p1=content&p2=05112021091>

⁸³ Rob Kitchin: *Cyberspace: the world in the wires*, Chichester, John WILEY & Sons Ltd, 1998, pp 11

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* pp 3-4

⁸⁶ Johan Lagerkvist: The rise of Online Public Opinion in the People’s Republic of China, *China, an International Journal*, Volume 3, Issue 1, March 2005, pp 123

mention having any further communications and taking activities against discriminations through legal means. Meanwhile, compared to the purely emotional blame and fierce catharsis, members of the HBVer forum are more inclined to carry through rational and practical discussion about the HBV-discrimination and come up with some constructive suggestions and opinions about current policies which are directly correlated with their fates and plights.

4. It has created some opportunities for the public consensus to really affect policy-making process.

Though to what extent the policy-making process is affected by ordinary people's political actions and opinions is not the only measurement of political participation, given the two layers of political participation concept applied in this thesis, this standard is still of importance for compared to the indirect layer, the direct layer of affecting and changing the policy-making outcomes is much more visible and easier to observe and estimate. So it is necessary to leave some space for this point at the end of the generalization part.

It is obviously and clearly demonstrated by the HBVer forum case that ordinary citizens who gather and exchange opinions in virtual community could affect some certain policy-making process and final policy outcomes, through both forming common opinions online and taking collective actions offline.

However, such phenomenon is peculiar rather than universal in China's current political system, which is only feasible on following premises or pre-conditions: (1) there should happen an kindling public issue first to raise mass people's attention and to draw on the state's involvement; (2) the relevant forum should represent the interests and appeals of a specific group which is tightly concerned with the policies; (3) the online discussions should be led to embedded and rational levels and finally form and bring forward feasible policy suggestions; (4) suggestions and notions should be introduced into the political system, typical ways are letter writing to related governmental departments, contacting with political leaders and asking for help from mass media.⁸⁷

5.2 Assessment and expectation

In order to give the final assessment, we should first take into consideration a number of international observers' suggestions, which could be classified into two extremes of opinions. Some have suggested that the Internet and the information technology pose potent threat to China's political system. Others believe that the Chinese regime will use increasingly powerful monitoring and surveillance technologies to supervise and control the Internet and always stay one step ahead of the

⁸⁷ Another typical case is the Sun Zhigang Incident happened in 2004 in China, see Appendix 1

democracy-seeking masses.⁸⁸

Such contradiction of viewpoints tells us that it is very important to set up a suitable standpoint when approaching this problem. Though both groups of opinions hold water from their specific points and views, the truth is considerably more complex than either extreme, thus we need to discern the problem from both sides.⁸⁹

If we only use the American and Anglo-Saxon standards of democracy and liberalism to testify the potential prospect of political changes brought on by the cyberspace and Internet, it is definitely very difficult for us to be satisfied and optimistic. But if we change a direction to compare what has happened in Chinese cyberspace in the aspect of political participation and political changes with the formerly rigorous and exclusive political system, we will find that there is much greater information and social spaces today than there would have been without Internet technology and cyberspace. Thus, despite the currently depressive atmosphere, some hopes are there and do promise that maybe the spring is not so far away as our perceptions and estimations.

A dichotomy can be applied here to estimate and assess the current state and the prospect of cyberspace development and its political impact in China. On one hand, what has been and is happening in the two above cases herald some inspiring signals and omens, that the Internet as a new mass medium allows for unprecedented access to multiple sources of images, news and ideas, which could to some extent challenge state hegemony over the distribution of information and ideologies in China;⁹⁰ moreover, some specific online groups have already penetrated into the real political life to directly affect the policy-making process. On the other hand, the CCP is also very concerned about the potential political usage of the cyberspace and CMC to challenge and resist official ideology and regime authority. The government has taken a series of deliberately designed policies and laws to control the activities and discourse in cyberspace, the communication and the information flow on Internet, in favor of shaping what they term as a “healthy and orderly” online environment.

That means although structural changes and landmark issues have occurred in both virtual cyberspace and real political life, the whole prospect of political development oriented to a more democratic regime is still dim and pessimistic rather than bright and optimistic. There is little evidence that the development of the new Internet media is significantly eroding the regime authority and the

⁸⁸ Shanthi Kalathil & Taylor C. Boas: *Open Networks, Closed Regimes, the impact of the Internet on authoritarian rule*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003, pp 14

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* pp 25

power monopoly of the CCP, or directly giving rise to any overwhelming political challenges in the short term.⁹¹

As a final summary, “Internet use on its own is unlikely to launch the dawning of a new political age in China.”⁹² Concrete political change is more likely to depend on some compositive factors, such as the smooth and sustainable economic development, the top-down institutionalization, the down-top political demands and appeals, the development of a relatively independent civil society, the gradual rising up of free mass media, etc, among which the Internet is one variable. In a word, the Internet in China is more likely to “contribute” to political changes rather than initiating a future transition from the authoritarian rules to gradual democratizations.

⁹¹ Shanthi Kalathil: China’s New Media Sector: keeping the state in, *the Pacific Review*, Volume 16, No. 4, 2003, pp 490

⁹² Shanthi Kalathil & Taylor C. Boas: *Open Networks, Closed Regimes, the impact of the Internet on authoritarian rule*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003, pp 42

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2. Internet Resource

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/>

Zhang Xianzhu: *from the challenger of discrimination to the propagandist of HBV knowledge*

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1004&ID=348713&page=1>

Why discrimination is hovering around

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1004&ID=467230&page=1>

The boundless road of anti HBV-discrimination

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1004&ID=509840&page=1>

The HBV forum: re-emblazing the hope of life

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1004&ID=498159&page=1>

The first anti HBV-discrimination commonweal advertisement was born in China, which is initiated, designed and contributed by comrades in our forum, accessible at:

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1004&ID=519768&page=1>

Propaganda is a good weapon to vindicate rights: accessible at:

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?boardID=1010&ID=521685&page=1>

Reimbursement money for vindication and propaganda activities of the 4th quarter, 2004,

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/forum/dispbbs.asp?BoardID=1008&ID=483595&replyID=&skin=1>

<http://www.tianya.cn/>

The Songhua River is severely contaminated because of the PetroChina blast in Jilin

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=78704726&idArticle=408870&strItem=free>

How the benzene empsons dirty the Songhua River (with pictures)

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=78704726&idArticle=408956&strItem=free>

Let us know something about the nitrobenzene which contaminated the Songhua River

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=78704726&idArticle=414943&strItem=free>

Worrying about my parents, do we need to move out Harbin

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=78704726&idArticle=412305&strItem=free>

Harbin under the curtain of night

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=409746&strItem=free>

Diary in panic (Harbin earthquake in my eyes)

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=395153&strItem=free>

Is it not late to dig well when feeling thirsty?—the Harbin issue reveals the absence of crisis-management institutions

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=414928&strItem=free>

Doubt the government's honesty and credit in the Harbin water issue

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=415052&strItem=free>

Comparison of two news reports about the Harbin water pollution issue — I am totally shocked!!

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=418903&strItem=free>

Harbin is just a point while the Songhua River is a line

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=477526&Key=778266684&idArticle=418732&strItem=free>

Harbin cutoff water supply for four days to inspect and measure the water quality

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=0&Key=0&idArticle=388237&strItem=free>

Investigation group designated by the State Council strictly checks the Jilin blast and the Songhua River pollution

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?idWriter=0&Key=0&strItem=free&idArticle=426328&flag=1>

If the water pollution issue happened in the USA

<http://www.tianya.cn/New/PublicForum/Content.asp?flag=1&idWriter=0&Key=0&idArticle=412533&strItem=free>

3. Reports and laws

CNNIC: the 1st *China Internet Development Statistic Report* (1997, October), the 15th *China Internet Development Statistic Report* (2005, January), and the 16th *China Internet Development Statistic Report* (2005, July), download address:

<http://www.cnnic.net.cn/index/0E/00/11/index.htm>

Chinese Academy of Social Science: *Year 2005 Survey of Internet usage and impact in five Chinese cities* (English version), download address:

<http://www.wipchina.org/?p1=content&p2=05112021091>

Provisions of Internet Information Service and Management (in Chinese), accessible at:

<http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/zhuanti/193663.htm>

Provisions of Internet Bulletin Board System Service and Management (in Chinese), accessible at:

<http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/zhuanti/194618.htm>

4. Useful Website

<http://www.hbvhbv.com/>

<http://www.tianya.cn/>

<http://www.wipchina.org/>

<http://www.cnnic.net.cn/>

<http://www.qihoo.com/forum/portal/topbbs/index.htm>

Appendix 1

Hepatitis B Fast Facts:

Hepatitis B is the most common serious liver infection in the world. Most people are able to fight off a hepatitis B infection and clear the virus from their blood. However, 5-10% of adults, 30-50% of children, and 90% of babies will not get rid of the virus and will develop chronic infection. Chronically infected people can pass the virus on to others and are at increased risk for liver problems later in life. Hepatitis B is most efficiently transmitted through blood and infected bodily fluids. This can occur through direct blood-to-blood contact, unprotected sex, illicit drug use, and from an infected woman to her newborn during the delivery process.

Hepatitis B can be spread by

- unprotected sex
- sharing IV drug needles
- living in a household with an infected person
- an infected mother to her newborn child at birth
- sharing earrings, razors or toothbrushes with an infected person
- unsterilized needles, including tattoo or piercing needles
- human bites

Hepatitis B is not spread by

- kissing on the cheek or lips
- coughing or sneezing
- casual contact such as hugging or holding hands
- eating food prepared by an infected individual

People are most at risk for hepatitis B if they

- are born to mothers who are infected with HBV
- live in close household contact with a chronically infected individual
- have unprotected sex or have had more than one sexual partner in the last 6 months
- have ever been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease (STD)
- men who have sex with men
- share needles and syringes
- are a health care provider or emergency responder who comes into contact with bodily fluids

- are a patient on kidney dialysis

The current situation of the discrimination against HBVers in China

The following information mainly comes from <http://www.hbvhbv.com/english>

The data of Ministry of health P.R China is shown that the occupancy of Hepatitis B carriers in China is 9.75%, which means 120 million people carry Hepatitis B virus in long term. In China, the HBVers group has met different degrees of discrimination in education, employment and many other aspects of social life, such as love, marriage and social communication for some historic and institutional reasons. For instance, HBVers have always been turned down after health checkups though they had passed the national exam for civil servants, and a lot of schools (from elementary schools to universities), reject to recruit HBVers even they have entered the examinations.

Information about the Sun Zhigang Case

Another typical case is the Sun Zhigang Incident happened in 2003 in China. This incident is triggered by the death of a young fashion designer whose name is Sun Zhigang in Guangzhou. Sun was arrested by police in the evening of 17th, April, 2003, just because he was not so well dressed and sat at street in 10:30 p.m., which caused some policemen suspect that he was a migration worker and then asker him to show the ID card. Unfortunately, Sun forgot to bring it that day, so he was taken away by police and then sent to the detention center. Two days later, Sun died in the detention aid station, the reason was “cardiopathy”. But according to the later medical jurisprudence report, the real reason of Sun’s death is assault and battery. This incident was firstly revealed by a newspaper and then widely spread through out the whole country with the help of Internet, triggering huge anger, animadvert and animosity to the legitimacy of the CCP regime. A lot of citizens under the leadership of five Jurists petitioned to the People’s Congress to ask the abolishment of the detention and deportation system. Under the urgent political pressures come from the mass people, the government had to ultimately abolish the detention and deportation institutions in 2003, June.

Appendix 2: General Information of Respondents

1. The category of ordinary members (23 respondents)

Respondent No. 1

(1) Age: 35; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Shanghai; (4) Place of residence: Shanghai; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: electrical engineer; (7) Family structure: Parents and a younger brother; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: face-to-face conversation.

Respondent No. 2

(1) Age: 21; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Hubei Province; (4) Place of residence: Wuhan; (5) Education background: college degree; (6) Profession: mechanism production; (7) Family structure: Parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: E-mail.

Respondent No. 3

(1) Age: 25; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Zhejiang Province; (4) Place of residence: Hangzhou; (5) Education background: PHD; (6) Profession: Phd. student; (7) Family structure: Parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: online chat.

Respondent No. 4

(1) Age: 27; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Guangxi Province; (4) Place of residence: Nanjing; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: IT; (7) Family structure: Parents, two elder brothers and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: online chat (several times).

Respondent No. 5

(1) Age: 27; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Hubei Province; (4) Place of residence: unrevealed; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: doctor; (7) Family structure: Parents and a younger sister; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: E-mail.

Respondent No. 6

(1) Age: 24; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Fujian Province; (4) Place of residence: Fuzhou; (5) Education background: college degree; (6) Profession: entertainment; (7) Family structure: Parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: E-mail.

Respondent No. 7

(1) Age: 29; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Heilongjiang Province; (4) Place of residence: Dalian; (5) Education background: middle school; (6) Profession: running own business; (7) Family structure: Parents, an elder sister, a younger brother and me; (8) Marriage status: divorced and single; (9) Interview form: E-mail.

Respondent No. 8

(1) Age: 24; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Henan Province; (4) Place of residence: Henan province (city unrevealed); (5) Education background: middle school; (6) Profession: company secretary; (7) Family structure: Parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: E-mail.

Respondent No. 9

(1) Age: 24; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Shandong Province; (4) Place of residence: Jining; (5)

Education background: college degree; (6) Profession: IT; (7) Family structure: Parents and me (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: E-mail.

Respondent No. 10

(1) Age: 26; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Shanxi (Xi'an) Province; (4) Place of residence: Xi'an; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: middle school teacher; (7) Family structure: Parents and a younger brother; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: E-mail and message.

Respondent No. 11

(1) Age: 33; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Tianjin; (4) Place of residence: Tianjin; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: accounting; (7) Family structure: Parents and two younger sisters; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: E-mail.

Respondent No. 12

(1) Age: 34; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Anhui Province; (4) Place of residence: unrevealed; (5) Education background: middle school (6) Profession: unemployment; (7) Family structure: Parents, two elder sisters, one younger sister and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: message.

Respondent No. 13

(1) Age: 25; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Shandong Province; (4) Place of residence: Qingdao; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: middle school teacher; (7) Family structure: Parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: telephone.

Respondent No. 14

(1) Age: 24; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Sichuan Province; (4) Place of residence: Chongqing; (5) Education background: college degree; (6) Profession: supply chain; (7) Family structure: Parents and an elder brother; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: E-mail.

Respondent No. 15

(1) Age: 22; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Shandong Province; (4) Place of residence: Chongqing; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: IT; (7) Family structure: Parents, two younger sisters and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: telephone conversation.

Respondent No. 16

(1) Age: 28; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Shanghai; (4) Place of residence: Shanghai; (5) Education background: college degree; (6) Profession: production; (7) Family structure: Parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: telephone conversations.

Respondent No. 17

(1) Age: 23; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Guangdong Province; (4) Place of residence: Shenzhen; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: business; (7) Family structure: Parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: online chat.

Respondent No. 18

(1) Age: 23; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Shanghai; (4) Place of residence: Shanghai; (5)

Education background: college degree; (6) Profession: electronic business; (7) Family structure: Parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: telephone conversations.

Respondent No. 19

(1) Age: 33; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Jiangxi Province; (4) Place of residence: Nanchang; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: civil servant; (7) Family structure: parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: E-mail and message.

Respondent No. 20

(1) Age: 28; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Guizhou Province; (4) Place of residence: Shanghai; (5) Education background: Master Degree; (6) Profession: pharmacy; (7) Family structure: Parents and four brothers and sisters; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: telephone conversations.

Respondent No. 21

(1) Age: 36; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Shanxi (Xi'an) Province; (4) Place of residence: Shanghai; (5) Education background: PHD; (6) Profession: Phd. Student; (7) Family structure: my 6 year-old son and me; (8) Marriage status: divorced and single; (9) Interview form: online chat.

Respondent No. 22

(1) Age: 25; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Hubei Province; (4) Place of residence: Wuhan; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: state enterprise (energy); (7) Family structure: Parents and an elder brother; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: online chat.

Respondent No. 23

(1) Age: 27; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Hunan Province; (4) Place of residence: Hebei Province (city unrevealed); (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: military officer; (7) Family structure: Parents and a younger sister; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: online chat.

2. The category of board masters (4 respondents):

Respondent No.1

(1) Age: 30; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Shanxi (Xi'an) Province; (4) Place of residence: Shanghai; (5) Education background: PHD; (6) Profession: Phd. Student; (7) Family structure: Parents and an elder sister; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: face-to-face conversations.

Respondent No. 2

(1) Age: 26; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Jiangsu Province; (4) Place of residence: Beijing; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: NGO employee; (7) Family structure: Parents and myself; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: telephone conversations (three times).

Respondent No. 3

(1) Age: 29; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Guangdong Province; (4) Place of residence: Guangzhou; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: foreign trade company; (7) Family structure: Parents, me, and a younger brother; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: online chat.

Respondent No.4

(1) Age: 23; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Shanghai; (4) Place of residence: Shanghai; (5) Education background: College Degree; (6) Profession: nurse; (7) Family structure: Parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: telephone conversations (once).

3. The category of active members who are not board masters (6 respondents)

Respondent No. 1

(1) Age: 27; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Tianjin; (4) Place of residence: Shanghai; (5) Education background: LLM; (6) Profession: business; (7) Family structure: Parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: face-to-face interviews.

Respondent No. 2

(1) Age: 25; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Jiangxi Province; (4) Place of residence: Fuzhou; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: media journalist; (7) Family structure: Parents, a younger sister and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: face-to-face conversations (in Shanghai).

Respondent No. 3

(1) Age: 25; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Hainan Province; (4) Place of residence: Guangzhou; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: electronic communication; (7) Family structure: Parents and me; (8) Marriage status: single; (9) Interview form: online chat (several times).

Respondent No. 4

(1) Age: 31; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Jiangsu Province; (4) Place of residence: Xi'an; (5) Education background: PHD; (6) Profession: university teacher; (7) Family structure: Parents, me, and a younger sister; (8) Marriage status: married; (9) Interview form: telephone conversations and E-mail.

Respondent No. 5

(1) Age: 35; (2) Gender: male; (3) Place of birth: Zhejiang Province; (4) Place of residence: Shanghai; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: running own company; (7) Family structure: my wife, our son and me; (8) Marriage status: married; (9) Interview form: online chat.

Respondent No. 6

(1) Age: 45; (2) Gender: female; (3) Place of birth: Anhui Province; (4) Place of residence: Hangzhou; (5) Education background: Bachelor's Degree; (6) Profession: author; (7) Family structure: my husband, our son and me; (8) Marriage status: unmarried; (9) Interview form: telephone interview.