

Lund University
Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies
Masters Programme in Asian Studies
East and South-East Asian Studies
Spring Semester, 2006

THE URBAN TECHNOSPACE
A Study on Internet Cafés in Shanghai

Author: Petra Räisänen
Supervisor: An Phuong Nguyen

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand how the young Shanghainese use the Internet in the 网吧, the Internet café; the demographic determinants that are associated with the use; and the motives and habits related to using the Internet café as an access point to the Internet. The central questions were: “Within the Internet café environment, how do the café users use the Internet and what are the motivations behind the Internet use?” and “How do the state, the culture and the society influence the Internet and the Internet café use, and what are the implications of that use on the state, the culture and the society?”

The study was conducted using a multiple case study approach. The empirical data was collected with a survey questionnaire and participatory observation. The main results of this study indicate that the main motivation behind the Internet café use was entertainment and that the Internet use in the cafes was ritualistic, habitual and pleasure-seeking. For the urban youth culture, the Internet cafes provided a space where the youngsters could reinforce their identities as trendy, technology-savvy urbanites. The government and the public concerns were reflected in the phenomenon as the Internet cafes have been accused of eroding public morality.

Keywords: Internet café, youth culture, urban China, technosocial space

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FOREWORD

I would like to thank Lundabygdens Sparbanks Stiftelse for the financial support I received for my fieldwork in Shanghai in 2005. I would also like to thank my parents, Anja and Pertti Räisänen, for their generous and endless support during my studies.

I am thankful for the assistance I got from my supervisor, Dr An Phuong Nguyen. For all the arrangement prior to my arrival and during my stay in China, I would like to thank Ms Maria Henoeh from the Nordic Centre, Fudan University.

I am grateful for the translation help I got from my fellow student and friend Li Ang. She helped me greatly by commenting and revising the interview questions, and she offered me her friendship and support during the studies in China and beyond.

Wang Hsiang-Lung, thank you for taking such a good care of me during the time in Shanghai. Diana Paz Sanchez, thank you for sharing the room, thoughts, and good times.

Last, but definitely not least, I would like to thank Mark Williams for his invaluable assistance in going through the Internet cafes of Shanghai at all the odd hours.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study examines the contemporary phenomena of the Internet and Internet café, youth culture in urban China, and globalisation and the new media from the Chinese point of view. The study looks at the Internet cafes as urban technospaces, ie. spaces where the technological, social and spatial dimensions of Internet use collide. The aim is to find out how the young, urban Shanghainese use the Internet cafés for accessing the Internet. Is the café used solely for entertainment, such as chatting with friends and playing online games, or is the Internet used as a tool for research, accessing information anonymously, and maybe even participating in political activities, as several other authors discuss in their research on civil society in China? Thus the main focus is on motivations behind the Internet café use, and the relationships between the café, the user, and the cultural and socio-political environments in China.

The Internet use in China is increasing rapidly. According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC, 2006), the provider of semi-official statistics on Internet development in China, there were a staggering 111 million Internet users in China by the end of year 2005, and the number is growing rapidly. The vast majority of users are in their 20s and 30s, and the Internet has shaped the way the young Chinese work, relax, and communicate, among other things. According to some authors, the Internet has created a new and different view of community for the youth, and new avenues for expression that are liberating, fun and trendy. A specific form of this development can be observed in the context of Internet cafes, where young people gather to access a computer and the Internet.

However, the rapid expansion of Internet use in China has not come without “side effects”. For example, Internet cafes have been accused of encouraging social problems such as gaming addiction, and being detrimental for the minors that spend too much time surfing the Internet. There have also been concerns related to the Internet cafes as a forum for occasional criminal exploitation. Chinese authorities seem to acknowledge that they can only control the Internet up to a point, but they are doing what they can to tighten the surveillance of the Internet users. The Chinese government’s policy towards Internet has been split. The goal has been to develop a modern information society, and too much control risks limiting the flow of commercial and scientific information to China, information that it needs for the modernisation purposes.

1.1 Background and Research Problem

Internet café, ie. cybercafé, is a place open to the public, where a computer can be hired for a period of time (for a fee) to access the Internet. In Chinese, these Internet cafes are known as 网吧 (wangba), ie. net bars. In the legislation of the People's Republic of China, the Internet cafes are defined as "Internet access centres"; "Internet access centre' shall mean places of business that offer Internet access services to the public through computers that are connected to the Internet." (Baker McKenzie 2001). A broader definition of the café is provided by iResearch (2005):

An Internet cafe /.../ offers public access online computers for web surfing or other services. Individuals can use a computer with Internet access /.../ for a fee. Internet cafe owners collect money through computer use fee and other value added services. In terms of group structure, Internet cafe can be classified into independent Internet cafés and chain Internet cafes. In terms of business scope, Internet cafe can be classified into pure Internet cafe and multi-function Internet cafe. Pure Internet cafe is an Internet café that merely provides online computers. On the contrary, multi-function Internet cafe also offer other services such as entertainment service, catering service, etc. (iResearch 2005:9).

Internet user, in turn, is a person who uses the Internet at least an hour per week on average (CNNIC 2006). Naturally, there is a variety of definitions available, but the one hour per week - approach is applied in the semi-official statistics concerning the Internet use in China. Thus this study acknowledges the one hour per week -limit as a guideline, considering that all the respondents of this study fulfilled this criteria easily.

Although there were establishments offering public Internet access in the United States already in the early 1990s, the concept and the name "cybercafe", a café with Internet access, were first introduced to the public by Ivan Pope in the beginning of 1994. He was commissioned to develop an Internet event for an arts weekend in the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The commercial establishments following the concept were soon opened all over the world, but the boom of the Internet cafes really started in the late 1990s, when the Internet use became more prevalent. High price of computers, lack of infrastructure, and limited availability of Internet services also contributed towards the explosive start of the Internet café businesses.

In time, Internet cafes have developed towards entertainment centres, where young and mostly male clientele spends time by playing games in the Internet. Previous research indicates that new

media and technology adoption is strongly linked to demographics. Early adopters of new technological innovations tend to be younger, better educated, and financially better off than the majority of individuals¹. In addition, males are usually more active in the early technology adoption than the females. This trend is reflected also in the past and present studies on Internet café use, as the research on who uses the Internet cafes, for what purposes, and why is getting similar results nearly throughout the world.

Internet use has generated a wide range of research in the academic circles. The Internet use can be looked at from the perspective of infrastructure development, democratisation, globalisation, national goals and concerns, cultural imperialism or nationalism, economics, and so forth, just to mention a few approaches. Internet cafés themselves have been arenas for research of the specific use of technology and the public Internet use (Lee 1999); of a dedicated Internet access point that has tied together the human, the technical, and the spatial environments (Laegran 2002); of the Internet use from the diversion perspective (Laegran & Stewart 2003); of the conflicting government response to the growth of the Internet café industry (Huang & Hong 2005); and of the socio-political contexts and digital divide (Mwesige 2004).

The Internet café phenomenon cannot be looked at in isolation; the surrounding political, social and cultural systems are shaping the environment of the Internet cafes significantly. Therefore this study includes discussion on the Chinese cultural and socio-political trends related to the Internet cafés, in order to provide a background for the analysis of the Internet café use. The focus of the study is more sociological and cultural, rather than political. Although the interest in participating in political discussion on the internet is briefly touched upon in this study, the main purpose is just to monitor the motives and habits related to using the Internet café as an access point to the Internet. It is out of the scope of this study to analyse further issues such as the possible democratising effect of the Internet, and the future fate of the one-party rule in China².

¹ Rogers (1995) divides the innovation adopters, ie. individuals, in five categories – innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. For further details on the diffusion of innovations theory, see Rogers, E.M. (1995). *Diffusion of Innovations*. 4th Edition. New York: Free Press.

² For discussion on the one-party rule and the Internet, see Kalathil, S. & Boas, T.C. (2003). *Open Networks, Closed Regimes*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

1.2 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This study aims to contribute to the discussion on the Internet in China, and its implications on the Chinese society. The context of the study is the Internet café that has become a specific arena of youth culture. This study examines the relationships between the social, spatial and technological dimensions of Internet cafes in urban Shanghai. The study takes a comparative socio-cultural standpoint to examining Internet use; approaches Internet users by looking at their motivations behind using the Internet; and looks at Internet cafes as spaces, where the online and offline worlds are intertwined.

The purpose is to understand how the young Shanghainese use the Internet in the 网吧, the Internet café, and what kind of demographic determinants are associated with the use. The main focus is on monitoring the motives and habits related to using the Internet café as an access point to the Internet. The Internet cafes are not only places for accessing the computer environment and the Internet, but public, physical, social and cultural spaces. Internet cafes are spaces where the offline world meets the online, ie. cyberworld. The Internet cafes place the “global society” of the Internet in a local context by providing a specific social space for accessing the Internet. The research questions are as follows:

1. Within the Internet café environment, how do the café users use the Internet and what are the motivations behind the Internet use?
2. How do the state, the culture and the society influence the Internet and the Internet café use, and what are the implications of that use on the state, the culture and the society?

1.3 Methods and Selection

1.3.1 *Design of the Study*

This study was designed as a non-experimental multiple case study. The aim of the study is to look at the Internet cafes as technosocial spaces, and assess the Internet use from both individual and societal perspectives. The study reviews literature related to new media research and the impact of the Internet on cultural and political values of a country, including journal articles, monographies, policy documents, and laws and regulations. Primary empirical data was collected

in Shanghai, China between September and November, 2005. Deductive reasoning based on the hypotheses and problems discussed in the literature is used to approach the complex environment of the Internet cafes and gain understanding of the technosocial nature of the space.

The study treats the three selected internet cafes as individual cases, and derives its data from a combination of qualitative and quantitative inquiries. As the quantitative approach alone would have not satisfied the need for multilayered data based on the experiences of the Internet café users, the qualitative data collection was initiated, too. This was because, according to Patton (1990:10), qualitative data may consist of descriptions of situations, events, people and interactions as well as direct quotations of their thoughts and beliefs. A qualitative approach “seeks to capture what people’s lives, experiences and interactions mean to them in their own terms”. The case study structure, in turn, was chosen as it is a strong framework for an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin 2003).

1.3.2 Selection and Data Collection

The empirical data for the thesis was collected by participatory observations and a questionnaire complemented with free-format, casual discussions in the Internet cafes. As Internet cafes are public spaces, there was no need to search for a gatekeeper that could give access to the field. The researcher had direct access to a computer, and field notes were collected in an electronic form. This was also done to improve the reliability of the data. As the observation guide and the questionnaire were prepared beforehand based on the literature review, it was easy to gather the data in an organised manner. The observations considered the physical and human environment of the café. The Internet café was entered as a normal customer and a joint role of a complete observer/complete participant was taken. The role gave a chance to observe the Internet café customers as a member of the customer group.

The interviews/questionnaire questions were designed to complement the data acquired by participant observation. The questions regarding the Internet use were formulated to reflect the respondents’ experiences in the field of information technology, their perceptions of the Internet and the Internet cafes, the behavioural patterns related to their Internet use and so forth. In addition, some basic personal information questions were asked to get demographic data, such as

gender, age, education and monthly income. The observation guide is included in the Appendix 1; the questionnaire is included in the Appendices 2 (in Chinese) and 3 (in English).

These multiple methods and resource were utilised, as the goal was to gain data from several sources. The participant observer has only one set of eyes, ears and experiences. The questionnaire alone is not enough to provide multilayered insights to the complex phenomenon under research. In-depth interviews on the other hand would not have been possible in the Internet café environment, where the customers pay for the time spent in the café, and they, consequently, are reluctant to participate in time-consuming activities. Thus the combination of observational methods with a questionnaire, complemented with casual conversations, was chosen as the appropriate approach to collecting rich data. As Chaffee and Chu (1992) state, ‘the “multiple operationism” approach of social science presumes that there is some validity to each kind of data, and that although each is potentially flawed they do not all have the same flaws’ (Chaffee & Chu 1992:217). Therefore this “multiple operationism” aims to deliver data where more confidence can be put in.

The Internet cafés were selected according to their geographical location; one in the centre, one in suburban Shanghai, and one further away in suburban Shanghai. Nevertheless, all the cafes were located within 15 kilometre radius from the city centre. The data collection was started with two pilot observations before carrying out the survey. The respondent selection in the Internet cafes was randomised, and yielded 28 responses. Of these respondents, five provided additional information in a free format, casual conversations. In addition, two persons provided insights to Chinese youth culture outside the Internet café environment.

1.3.3 Analytical Methods and Other Considerations

During the data collection, the most common reason for refusing to participate in the study was that the researcher was disturbing the ongoing game. The best way to get a “gamer” to participate was to approach them either when they just arrived and were logging in to the computer game or when their computer crashed and they had to wait for the restart. In general, females were more likely to answer positively when asked to participate in the study than the males. It was essential to monitor that the females did not become an over-represented group in the sample; otherwise the questionnaire results would not give a rightful picture of the café environment.

The analytical reasoning in this thesis is two-fold. Firstly, the relevant theoretical concepts and viewpoints on current Internet café research are reviewed. The conceptual framework looks at the Internet use as new media diffusion, a cultural phenomenon, and a world-wide success that puts pressure on the societal and political systems of the country. Then, the discussion on the Internet café as a modern dimension of space is further developed. Secondly, the socio-cultural-political environment of China is discussed in order to provide a basis for analysing the Internet café phenomenon in the Shanghai context. Every Internet café examined in this study is looked at through the framework established in chapters 2 and 3. One of the main concepts applied to this study, the concept of a technospace, is a guiding line in the analysis of the data. As the study attempts to detect how the Internet café has become a specific place for the urban youth to spend time in, it is essential to direct the analysis based on the framework established in chapter 2.

Regarding the sources used for this study, the main problem was finding reliable statistics on the issues. Finding comprehensive and trustworthy statistics on a phenomenon that changes rapidly was challenging, and the figures presented here should be read as guidelines only. Most of the Internet-related statistics come from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) that acts as a semi-official statistical agency. CNNIC carries out surveys that have received methodological criticism, but the surveys results are still widely used in research.

1.4 Overview of the Thesis

In the following, chapter 2 ties together the technological, social and spatial aspects related to the Internet and the Internet café use. The chapter discusses Internet use, the Internet users, and the Internet cafes from three theoretical perspectives. Chapter 3, in turn, looks at Internet use and the Internet cafes from the Chinese perspective. Firstly, statistical data on these issues is reviewed. Secondly, the discussion on the interrelationships between the Internet, the state and the society is opened. This discussion goes through the split approaches of the state and the public in relation to the Internet use.

Chapter 4 is dedicated for the case study results. The Internet cafes are introduced and the results are presented following the framework derived from the discussion in chapters 2 and 3. This chapter includes the core of the thesis, and it leads to the conclusions (chapter 5) that summarise the key findings of the thesis.

2 THE TECHNOLOGICAL, THE SOCIAL AND THE SPATIAL

Internet has undeniably revolutionised the way people communicate. Internet has become a phenomenon that seems to have its own will; the adoption of the technology is growing rapidly, and the flow of information over national boundaries has led to discussion on the development of the world to a global village. However, the uses of the new media are strongly influenced by the political, economic, social and cultural milieus of a country. These conditions affect the way the new media is adapted, developed and controlled. This chapter looks at Internet use from a socio-cultural perspective, and discusses how the new media is utilised from the uses and gratifications perspective. Later, Internet cafes are examined as specific spaces, where technology meets the social and spatial dimensions of the Internet use. The rationale behind using these three main approaches in this study is that the cultural studies framework discussed in chapter 2.1, combined with the media use analysis of chapter 2.2 and the ethnographic methodology of chapter 2.3, help to provide rich data on the phenomenon of the Internet cafe. These concepts provide a basis for analysing the aspects of the Internet and the Internet café use in China in chapters 3 and 4.

2.1 Internet Use and the Comparative Socio-Cultural Perspective

From a socio-cultural perspective, modern communication and new media research can look at how the new media affects the cultural foundations of a society, and vice versa. Therefore, both the Internet and the Internet café can only be understood according to their local context (Laegran & Stewart 2003). The importance of the local context can be examined by using a comparative approach, where the communication and new media are analysed across spatial and/or temporal boundaries. Blumler, McLeod and Rosengren (1992) stress the importance of this comparative approach in research concerning communication and cultural change. In their theoretical discussion, the definition of comparative communication research is broadened from the more restricted one used in the bulk of research. Thus, work is comparative when “comparisons are made across two or more geographically or historically (spatially or temporally) defined systems, the phenomena of scholarly interest which are embedded in a set of interrelations that are relatively coherent, patterned, comprehensive, distinct, and bounded” (Blumler, McLeod & Rosengren 1992: 7-9).

As stated earlier, comparative research reflects how the systemic context of empirical phenomena may have shaped the phenomena in question. This means that comparative new media research is system-sensitive. Therefore, the principles of the system, where the phenomena are embedded in, need to be understood and kept in mind. This approach can turn out to be more creative and innovative and not restricted to only testing, validating and revising existing theory. Moreover, as comparative research has traditionally been associated solely with spatial distinctions, the research of new media has been fixed to a predetermined point of time. The new temporal comparative analysis can bring new viewpoints to new media research, as it acknowledges that “space conditions time, and time conditions space” (ibid.). The goal is to generate a new standpoint for researching information and communication technology and its impact on culture and society.

In the context of this study, the most important notions of comparative communication research are the tools that this approach provides for analysing a phenomenon across both space and time. In detail, the Internet café phenomenon in urban China can be analysed through a four-fold scheme, by treating the phenomenon (Blumler, McLeod & Rosengren 1992:12-13):

1. as object of analysis
2. as context of this study
3. as unit of analysis
4. as component of larger international system.

Although the aim of this study is not to provide exclusively a comparison of the Internet café phenomenon in relation to, say, Western equivalents, or try to grasp all the levels of temporal or spatial aspects related to the phenomenon, the framework anyhow gives a tool to have a broad spectrum view over the Internet café phenomenon in urban China. The Internet café phenomenon is treated as a subunit of larger systems; the socio-cultural and regulatory systems of China, and the mass media system of the Internet.

2.2 Internet Users and the Uses & Gratifications Approach

The uses & gratifications approach, which has been used in the mass media research since the 1960s, looks at the motivations behind media use and access. Before the application of this approach in the Internet use context, the uses & gratifications paradigm was widely used in research assessing the motivations behind television and radio media use. It has also been used for

consumer and marketing research and it is nowadays applied to, for example, the Internet commerce context (Stafford, Stafford & Schkade 2004). The uses & gratifications approach enables the researcher to examine communication within interpersonal and mediated context by using interviews and questionnaires. In detail, the uses & gratifications researchers try to find out the antecedents, motives, and outcomes of communication (Papacharissi & Rubin 2000). Consequently, when utilising the uses & gratifications research, it is important not to reflect the researchers own uses and gratifications patterns in the interviews and questionnaires.

The logic of the uses & gratifications approach is concerned in the interrelationships between the purposes of the media choice, social circumstances, and assessment of media experience. The model can be used to study culture and media effects from the users' perspective (McQuail 1985:103). The media use reflects the social and psychological makeup of the user, and it either gratifies specific needs of the user (non-habitual, instrumental use) or it has no specified purpose (habitual, ritualistic use) (Rubin 1984). The uses and gratifications approach produces "useful studies of particular audiences and particular content types" (McQuail 1985:104). Thus the approach can look at the Internet use as a method of achieving a certain outcome (ie. entertainment, information, social connection) in order to understand the motivations behind the media use.

McQuail (1985) provides a framework for assessing these motivations through the viewpoints of entertainment orientation or escape from "normal" life, social relationships and communication in order to "keep in touch", personal identity and enforcement of that identity, and information seeking or personal development. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) add the possible desire to avoid physical interpersonal communication as a motivation to use the new media. In addition, Leung (1998) studied the new media users and their lifestyles in urban China; Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. He suggested the inclusion of the new media users' lifestyles to the demographic variables when examining the motivations behind media use. As the users have a certain social identity, they direct the media use to match this profile. The key findings suggest that:

- (1) Lifestyles significantly affect innovativeness; (2) the upscale socioeconomic profile of earlier adopters was consistent with early research; and (3) adoption of certain new media technologies appeared to project certain social identities such as 'life expansionists', 'sophisticated and fashionable', and 'pleasurable and enjoyable'. (Leung 1998:781)

In other words, those urban Chinese who adopted more new media technologies than the others seemed to lead more sophisticated, fashionable, expansion-oriented, and to a degree Westernised lifestyles. Computer skills were seen as a investment in the future, as they were expected to contribute to “social prestige” and “social distinction” (Leung 1998:786-790). In addition to Leung (1998), the fashionability and lifestyle perspectives of Internet use have been confirmed by Lee (2000), who examined Internet cafes in southern England. More discussion on this Internet café context will be presented in the following chapter.

2.3 Internet Cafes as Technosocial Spaces

Although the sociology of technology has looked at the social-technological relationship of computer use as a seamless web or a network, it has mainly ignored the spatial dimension of these technosocial relationships in research. By expanding the scope of research, this new network approach “highlights that the technical, the social and the spatial is entwined and must be understood in relation to each other” (Laegran 2002:159). Thus, the concept of technospace (Laegran 2002) or technosocial space (Laegran & Stewart 2003) refers to a space, where technology and human interaction intersect. The internet café (“the spatial”) can be described a space where computer and the Internet (“the technological”) meet social interaction (“the social”). Moreover, the technosocial space, the Internet café, offers a place where the online world, ie. computer-mediated communication, meets the offline world, ie. on the spot human interaction.

Laegran and Stewart (2003) acknowledge the importance of the spatial dimension in the Internet café research. The Internet café is a network of the physical space, the product (the computer and the Internet), and the people. The Internet café blurs the spatial boundaries of the actual physical place. Instead, the local is intertwined with the global (Laegran & Stewart 2003:360). These arguments are in line with the hypotheses of the social theory of space. Castells (2000) suggests that new spatial forms and processes are emerging as a result of the structural transformation of societies, which in turn is triggered by the information technology development. He approaches the concept of space from the point of view of social practices. The postmodern social theory treats space as “the material support of time-sharing social practices” (Castells 2000:440-441).

Lee (1999) argues in her study on Internet cafes in south eastern England that the cafes provide a “distinct and dedicated” public space, where the use of the Internet is extended beyond the normal

boundaries. The users do not have to share the computers with anyone, as the case might be for example at home or at work. In addition, since the users do not have the ownership of the terminals, the symbolic value of the Internet use is emphasised.

Non-ownership profoundly changes the symbolic dimensions of such technology consumption. /---/
As consumption of non-tangible good, public internet use is clearly symbolic as well as material in its significance, and this /.../ suggested that public internet consumption might for some users be part of a highly self-conscious cultivation of lifestyle. (Lee 1999:341).

Although the study did not find the suggested fashionable image of the Internet cafés to be significant for the users, the cafés still offered a space for diversion and escape from their normal lives. The Internet cafes also provided a more lucrative environment for the female users to access a computer and the Internet, as “the café environment makes internet use more of a social activity than a ‘gadget’” (Lee 1999: 344). The females in the café were also found to be more geared towards maintaining social networks and seeking information than the male users, who were more likely to surf entertainment sites and play games.

When examining the Internet café as a technosocial space, it is essential to look also at concepts of domestication (Laegran 2002) and configuration (Laegran & Stewart 2003). Domestication refers to “how individual users, as well as collectives, negotiate practice and symbols of the technology, that is, how the technology is /.../ integrated in to the culture where it is used” (Laegran 2002:159). Configuration in turn refers to “the overall design of the technospace /---/ from material design to the way in which café managers and users interact” (Laegran & Stewart 2003:362).

3 CULTURAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This chapter discusses the areas of Internet use and Internet café use from the Chinese perspective. First, a basic statistical profile of these issues, as well as main regulatory framework, is presented; then, the background information is expanded to the discussion on the politico-legal and socio-cultural factors that shape the Internet and the Internet café use in China.

3.1 Internet Use in the Chinese Context

The Internet has sustained its strong growth in China. The number of Internet users was estimated to be 111 million (8.5% of the population) in December 2005. The number of users has grown by 18.1% from previous year (CNNIC 2006). In 2007, the Internet users are estimated to be at 205 million (iResearch 2005), or at 300 million in 2008 (HRIC 2005). When looking at the dispersion of the users around the country, the Internet penetration rates for rural and urban areas deviate significantly. There are 91.686 million Internet users in the cities of China, which represents 16.9% of the urban population. In the rural areas, the Internet penetration rate is only 2.6% with 19.314 million Internet users. Furthermore, over 50 per cent of the Internet users are located in the Eastern part of China alone. (CNNIC 2006; Giese 2003).

As Table 1 shows, the Internet penetration rates in the urban areas are considerably higher than in the more remote rural provinces. In Shanghai, there are 4 630 000 Internet users (as of December 2005), which accounts for 26.6% of the local population and 4.2% of all the Internet users in China. Only Beijing has a higher percentage of local population online, 28.7% (ibid.).

Table 1. Internet Users by Provinces/Cities: Top 4 and Bottom 4.

| Province/City | Number of Users (millions) | Percentage of Domestic Internet Users | Percentage of Local Population |
|---------------|-------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Beijing | 4.28 | 3.9% | 28.7% |
| Shanghai | 4.63 | 4.2% | 26.6% |
| Tianjin | 2.29 | 2.1% | 22.4% |
| Guangdong | 14.86 | 13.4% | 17.9% |
| ... | ... | ... | ... |
| Anhui | 2.76 | 2.5% | 4.3% |
| Henan | 3.96 | 3.6% | 4.1% |
| Tibet | 0.09 | 0.1% | 3.3% |
| Guizhou | 1.09 | 1.0% | 2.8% |

Source: CNNIC (2006).

Males represent closer to 60 per cent of the Internet users. According to CNNIC (2006), the average Internet user is male, unmarried, under 30 years old, has high school or vocational institute education, and has a monthly income of max. 2000 yuan (RMB). Overall, the under 30-year-olds represent 71% of all the Internet users.

3.2 Internet Cafés in the Chinese Context

Finding reliable statistics concerning the actual number of Internet cafes in China is nearly impossible. The Internet cafes mushroomed all over the country with the start of the Internet gaming boom in the late 1990s, and the amount of illegal, ie. unlicensed, Internet cafes increased quickly as the regulation of the cafes was undeveloped, and the licensing bureaucracy was rigid. High demand led to a rampant underground café boom that was cut short in 2002 after a high-profile Beijing Internet café fire alarmed the government (or gave means to the government, as some authors would argue) to take strict actions against the Internet café market, and several cafes were closed down. The statistics usually reflect only the estimates for the licensed cafes, and excludes the unlicensed establishments. Despite of the stricter regulatory framework and control of the cafes, the statistics should be treated with caution, keeping in mind that the figures might not give a completely truthful picture of the situation.

The first Internet café in China, the Shihuakai Internet Café, was opened in November 1996. Since then, the Internet cafes were quickly adopted as new forms of entertainment centres. The growth was quick until the incident in 2002 led to suspension of licensing of the cafes, and the regulatory measures affected the profitability of the cafes and led to further closures. Thus the (official) number of cafes started to fall (see figure 1.). The market is forecasted to normalise in the near future. While the Internet café establishments are struggling, the number of Internet café users continues to grow rapidly (see figure 1), although the future might bring some shift towards using the Internet at home, as more Chinese can afford to buy the necessary equipment (iResearch 2005). In 2005, 25% of the whole population and 80% of rural population have access to the Internet only through the Internet cafes (HRIC 2005).

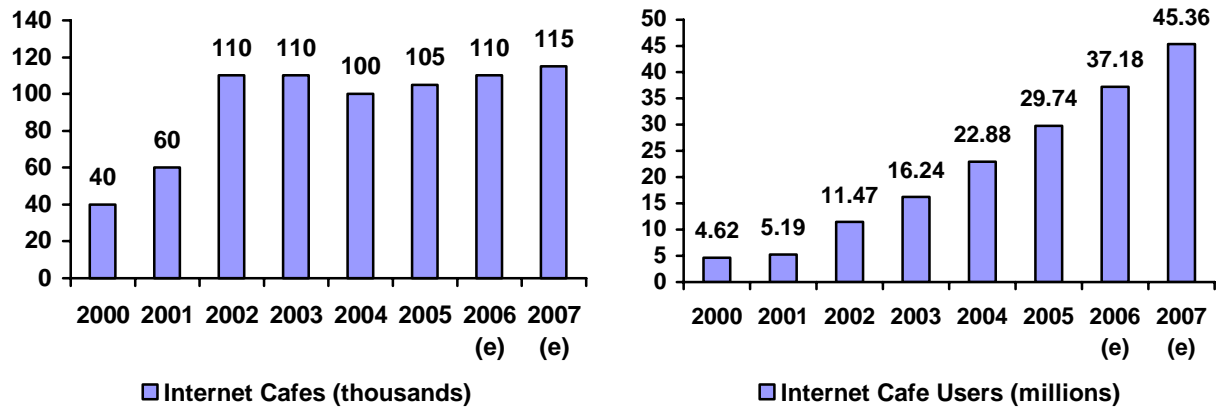


Figure 1. Internet Cafes and Internet Café Users in China. Source: iResearch (2005)

When looking at the Internet cafes in Shanghai, Li Jian estimated in May, 2004 that the number of Internet cafes had grown to around 5000 (Li 2004). However, this number has most likely decreased of late due to the tightened government regulations and crackdowns of illegal cafes.

3.3 Regulatory Efforts

In February 1996, the first official decree “Temporary Measures for the Management of Computer Information Network’s International Connection” was issued. The decree formed the basis for regulating the Internet access in China, and it declared:

- (1) All international Internet traffic had to go through officially approved gateways,
- (2) all ISPs must be licensed,
- (3) Internet users need to be registered, and
- (4) “harmful information” that is “subversive” or “obscene” must be banned (Qiu 2003: 11)

Later on, a number of regulatory efforts have been taken to control the Internet service providers, (ISPs), the Internet content providers (ICPs), the users, and all possible aspects related to the Internet. The government has also taken measures to ensure that these laws really are enforced: the Ministry of Public Security and the State Security Bureau have established control authorities, such as the cyber-police, to monitor Internet use on the national, provincial and municipal levels (Qiu 2003:11). These measures have resulted in numerous closures of portals and websites, as well as arrests and prosecutions of individuals who have acted against these laws. Thus spreading information that could be “subversive” was made more difficult and monitorable. The most recent developments include the government’s “teaming up” with the international content providers

such as Yahoo! and Google, and equipment providers such as Microsoft, for support to the control efforts.

Another regulatory aspect regarding the Internet in China is the control of the Internet cafes. The “measures for the administration of Internet access centers”³, ie. Internet cafes and other public Internet access providers, are applicable to the establishment, operation, use, supervision and control of these centres. The measures also include the allocation of these activities between the government bodies (article 3). The regulatory measures take a strict point of view to the responsibilities of the service provider. The sanctions for any breaches of the measures are strict, and vary from fines to withdrawal of business licence. In addition, the responsibilities of the individual Internet café user are defined, and the users are encouraged to strict self-discipline:

Users who go online at Internet Access Centres shall abide by laws and administrative regulations and observe social ethics. They shall exercise strict self-discipline, behave well online and carry out healthy and civilised online activities (article 5) (Baker McKenzie 2001:371).

In 2004, the authorities initiated a campaign targeting the Internet cafe industry regulation. According to iResearch (2005), this campaign featured three major tasks: (1) to close Internet cafes without sufficient license and market access; (2) to monitor and punish the illegal allowance of youngsters’ entry to Internet cafes; (3) to fight against unhealthy info communication through Internet (iResearch 2005). The campaign resulted in the suspension of business of about 21,000 Internet cafes, withdrawal of 2131 business licenses, and closure of about 47,000 Internet Cafes without sufficient licenses (iResearch 2005).

As a result of the stricter control measures regarding the Internet cafes, the cafes employ relatively high levels of self-discipline in order to avoid the suspension of business license, fines, or total closure of the café. ID card is nowadays required – in theory at least - to enter an Internet café. Minors are allowed in the premises only during certain times, or not at all. The legal age of 18 is required for playing Internet games (Li 2004). Additionally, the State Council issued the Ordinance 458 in January 2006 that obliges all Internet cafes in China to purchase (ibid.) video-monitoring systems that cover entrances, exits and main corridors.

³ Issued by the Ministry of Information Industry, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Culture and the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, April 3, 2001. (Baker McKenzie 2001:370).

3.4 The State, the Society and the Internet

3.4.1 *Split Approaches*

From the Chinese government's point of view, the Internet has generated split goals and split concerns. The goal is to build a modern information society, as strong ICT development is essential for maintaining the competitiveness of the country in the globalising market. On the other hand, the government seeks to maintain its position and legitimacy. These two goals are inevitably conflicting; loosening up the flow of information to the country creates technology-savvy people and businesses, but at the same time makes the control of the information flow harder to manage. Thus the Internet is seen either as a threat to the political system of China, or a powerful tool of the regime to monitor dissent (Hachigian 2002; Kalathil & Boas 2003; Hong & Huang 2004).

The Great Firewall of China is one of the government's efforts to control the information flow in the Internet. Internet sites that are suspected to contain sensitive information or otherwise improper material, such as pornographic material, references to Taiwanese and Tibetan independence, Falun Gong, the Dalai Lama, the Tiananmen Square incident, opposition political parties, or a variety of anti-Communist movements, are all blocked by the Great Firewall. The authorities have advised the Internet service providers, major portals, Internet cafés, and even foreign-owned service providers to make sure that no subversive content is displayed. In addition, the Golden Shield Project encourages the use and development of tracking and filtering software (Qiu 2003:11-12).

These control measures have resulted in a cat-and-mouse play with the Internet users, who are trying to avoid the control measures by installing software that restricts the effect of filtering, and by using proxy servers for connecting to the Internet. In addition, one of the major concerns of the government, besides the inability to control the information flows in the Internet, has been the anonymous access that the Internet cafes have provided to their clients. Secondly, as the Internet café business has been profitable and the demand has been high, illegal cafes have mushroomed everywhere in the country. As the process of establishing and registering an Internet café is rather costly and time consuming, several café owners have decided to provide the services without proper licensing and registration. This trend was cut short in 2002, when tens of youngsters died

in a fire in the “Lanjisu” Internet café in central Beijing. Although this fire was not the first of its kind, the high profile location gave the government an incentive to take harsh measures against the underground – and even the licensed – Internet cafes.

Despite of the government’s concerns, Hong and Huang (2005) argue in their research concerning the socio-political role of the Internet cafes in China, the Internet café use in China tends to be geared towards entertainment, such as emailing, chatting and gaming, and they are not places for fulfilling political aspirations. But it is not only the government that had doubts concerning the reputation of the mushrooming and underregulated Internet cafes. Parents of teenagers had started to express growing concern on the safety of the Internet cafes, and the negative influence that the cafes seemed to have on their children. The time that the youngsters spent in the cafes was the major concern of the parents; with the rise of the Internet gaming, some teenagers spent hour after hour in the café playing Internet games, and even developed various levels of gaming addiction. The market for the Internet games is vast in China, and it is estimated to grow by staggering 50 per cent per annum. Thus the gaming market has become a profitable and lucrative for the game manufacturers. According to the estimates of CNNIC (2006), there are 40 million online game players in China, most of them youngsters between 15 and 25 years old. Li (2004) interviewed youngsters in an Internet café in Shanghai in 2004, and concluded that the youngsters preferred playing games and chatting in the Internet cafes rather than staying home under the watching eye of their parents.

3.4.2 Socio-Cultural Change and the Urban Lifestyle

The discussion around the Internet’s Westernising effect on the Chinese cultural and political life has been lively and vivacious. Modernisation theories have commonly expected an erosion of the Confucian values in the Asian societies as a by-product of industrialisation and economic development. Western mass media, especially the Internet, has been seen as a form of cultural imperialism and a tool for dispersing non-Confucian values and Americanisation over the “rest of the world” (Chaffee & Chu 1992: 212-215; Bockover 2003). The researchers agree that it is hard to estimate the magnitude of impact that the exposure to the Western values has on the Confucian culture, but they also argue that there are clearly conflicting values involved.

The Internet use in China provides a field of research, where both cross-space and cross-time approaches are needed to understand the phenomenon. The Internet, a predominantly Western invention and the representative of “Western values”, can be analysed as a spatial phenomenon between the two value systems. In addition, the temporal approach is needed in looking at the effects of the Internet use on the cultural and societal systems of China. Chaffee and Chu (1992) argue that Western entertainment media and the modernisation process may have an eroding effect on “the interpersonal script of China’s Confucian society”. This impact may even be as significant as the Communist Party’s culturally counterstructuring⁴ measures (Chaffee & Chu 1992: 235).

Thus, the cultural environment of China needs to be discussed in the light of the traditional Confucian society, the culturally counterstructured Communist society, and the contemporary, modernising (and possibly Westernising) Chinese society. Firstly, the individualistic consumer culture delivered by the Internet is changing the landscape of the youth culture in the urban areas of China, where the Western media and the Internet exposure is significantly higher than in the remote rural areas (see Table 1 on page 13). Comparative studies on Confucian cultural values, such as Chaffee and Chu’s (1992) fieldwork in Shanghai municipality, have pointed out how the urban, young and educated audience is more receptive for new trends. There are various reasons why the urban centres are seen to be more conceiving environments for new trend diffusion. People are closer to each other, media reaches people more effectively, cities provide enhanced access to education, and so forth.

The urban youth rely increasingly on the “global” culture in their reinforcement of lifestyles and values, and the generation seems to be less interested in social and political issues than the previous ones (Kang 2004: 149-150). The rising “technoliberalism” guides the identity formation of these urban young people, who “often identify themselves as ‘xin renlei’ (new humanity), or, lately, ‘xin xin renlei’ (newer newer humanity)” (ibid.). The lifestyle of a “xin xin renlei” endorses individualism and freedom, new technology, self-expression and pleasure-seeking, and even promotes the use of a new slang that reflects the identity of a techno-savvy urbanite.

⁴ Counterstructuring is defined as a “Revolutionary program directed toward cultural change, in which social relationships /.../ were fundamentally altered, and the population was subjected to a relentless program of ideological indoctrination to establish the new social structure as normative.” For more discussion on the topic, see Chaffee & Chu (1992: 212-213).

4 CASE STUDY: SHANGHAI INTERNET CAFES

The Internet cafes discussed in this study were selected based on their geographical location in order to give a varied picture of the activities in the Internet cafes in Shanghai. One of the cafes was located in the centre, one in the suburbs, and one further away in the suburbs close to a major university. All the Internet cafes studied were licensed, as the search phase during the selection process did not result in finding any underground establishments. This is, however, in no way conclusive discovery regarding the Internet cafes, as getting access to the unlicensed establishments living in the fear of sanctions due to the stricter regulatory environment after 2002 would have required better local knowledge. The Internet cafes that were surveyed are identified as A, B and C as follows:

Internet café A – The Suburban Gaming Centre

Located in the north-eastern suburbs, café A was close to a large university. This café was clearly geared towards the young and mostly male gamer clientele, and thus the females were underrepresented. Positioned in the second floor of a commercial building, the café was fairly large and considerably cheaper than the other ones. The café was part of a chain that had several cafes in the Shanghai area. Still, the café was easy to miss unless one kept eyes open for the signs under the 2nd floor windows. Instant noodles and drinks were available.

Internet café B – The Controlled Functional Entertainment Centre

This café was located in the suburbs in the northern side of the city, approximately 5 kilometres from the city centre. Café B had a more balanced gender distribution, and the Internet gaming was not the most popular activity amongst the customers. The café was very large, in the backyard and the third floor of an office building. Despite of the “hidden” location, the café had signs easily visible to the main passing street. The control and surveillance of the customers was significantly stricter than in cafes A and C. Drinks and snacks were available.

Internet café C – The Central Haven for Spending Time

This café was very centrally located, tucked away in the third floor of an office building, above a massage parlour. Café C was part of a chain of Internet cafes. The café was smaller than the suburban counterparts, and it had large signs to the street. The clientele was clearly the youngest. Gaming was the main activity in the café. Drinks, snacks and instant noodles were available.

The key introductory features of the cafes A, B and C are summarised in the Table 2 below.

Table 2. Summary of the Key Features of the Cafes A, B and C

| Category | Internet Café A | Internet Café B | Internet Café C |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Neighbourhood | Suburban | Suburban | Central |
| Male/female ratio | 78/32 | 70/30 | 75/25 |
| Price | Deposit 10 RMB, charge 2.5 RMB/hour | Deposit 10 RMB, charge 4 RMB/hour | Deposit 10 RMB, charge 4 RMB/hour |
| Drinks and food available | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Guards | No | Yes | No |
| Opening hours on display | No | Yes, 08:00-24:00 | No |

In addition, a fourth café was visited in the centre for reference purposes. No surveys or observations were conducted there. The observations and surveys in the Internet cafes A, B and C were conducted several times during different times of the day with the aim of getting a comprehensive picture of the activities in the Internet cafés. The most common time to survey the cafes was between 16:00 and 18:00. The atmosphere, clientele and the type of Internet use can change according to the time of the day, and the cafes tended to get more crowded towards the later evening. The opening hours of the cafes were not always clear and the hours were most likely flexible in the cafes A and C.

4.1 Internet Cafes: The Spatial

The Internet cafes in question were all located in places, that were not primarily designed for the café use, ie. office or residential buildings. As Internet cafes often are located close to schools and universities, the location of these educational establishments was observed during the research. Only one of the cafes, café A, was located in close proximity to a major university. This did not have any difference to the user demographics. All the cafes A, B and C were relatively large in size; they provided computers for approximately 150, 170, and 120 customers, respectively. Cafes A and C consisted of one large room with a few semi-private booths in the back of the room, that were mostly used by customers who wanted to watch movies, or those who came with friends to play games in the café. Café B had two rooms, of which the other one was considerably more peaceful and offered semi-private rows for those who wanted to enjoy the Internet without having to be in close physical contact with the other customers. The cafes were rather dimly lit, had fan cooling and air conditioning, except in café A that lacked a/c and tended to get high temperatures during the day.

The computers were arranged in back-to-back lines and groups of three to eight persons. Despite of their fairly uniform premises, the Internet cafes studied clearly had a certain user profile in their minds when configuring (see chapter 2.3 for definition of configuration) the café space. Cafes A and C were designed to attract the gaming audience, whereas the café B attempted to attract in general a more “adult” crowd. Both cafes A and C had their walls decorated with posters featuring characters from the popular Internet games. The café B, however, was scarcely decorated. Instead of the game posters, there were several signs instructing the users on their rights and responsibilities as a customer. Café B also had guards wearing identification tags, who regularly “patrolled” between the lines of computers, monitoring the use of the Internet. The background music in all the cafes was contemporary Chinese pop on low volume. Café A hardly ever played any music. In general, the interior design of the cafes had received little attention, and the ambience of the cafes relied heavily on the social aspect of the Internet cafes: the customers.

All the cafes had at least a small selection of snacks and drinks for sale. Whereas the European Internet cafes often try to influence the “trendy” image of the café by offering espresso-based coffees and other goods related to a traditional café (Laegran & Stewart 2003), the Shanghai cafes did not emphasise the value-added services in their customer orientation. The most common drinks were soft drinks and hot tea; snacks included crisps and instant noodles. None of the cafes offered any other additional services.

In regards to the configuration of the computer environment, it could be observed that despite of the differences between the target audiences, all the cafes had the major Internet gaming software installed. The computers were new and powerful in cafes A and B, whereas café C had slightly older computer units that still were powerful enough for the Internet gaming. The machine did not offer external drives (USB, floppy disk, CD-rom) for customer use. Software included major chatting programs, but no word-processing or other office use programs.

4.2 Internet Café Users: The Social

In regards to the human environment of the Internet cafes, the results follow the demographic factors follow the findings of the current stream of research on Internet cafes. The users are dominantly male (68%, versus 32% of females), young (under 25 years) and have at least some

secondary level education. The demographic profile of the median Internet café user can be summarised as follows:

1. male
2. 18 to 23 years old
3. has lower university-level education (Bachelor's degree)
4. has a monthly income of 1000 to 5000 RMB
5. has been using the Internet for 1-3 years
6. has Internet access at home and accessed the Internet most commonly at home
7. uses the Internet more than 10 hours per week
8. visits the Internet café 2-6 times a week.

The young males formed the major user group. The proportion of females of the clientele varied from 0 to around 40 per cent during the observation; café A had clearly lower proportion of female users than cafes B and C. Agewise, the 18 to 23 year-olds were clearly the largest group (68% of the respondents). Only two of the respondents were 30 years or over. In turn, only one of the respondents was under 18 years old. The educational level of the respondents reflected the predictions based the general demographic profile of the Internet users in China, although the respondents were slightly better educated than the average user (50% had university-level education). This, however, might only be reflecting the geographic location of café A; as it was located close to a university, the educational level of the respondents was higher than in cafes B and C. Thus the overall statistical profile might be biased. Anyhow, the remaining 50% of respondents had completed at least secondary-level education.

The Internet café users were not beginners with the Internet. The median group had used the Internet for one to three years, but the majority (53%) had experience from more than 4 years. 71% of the respondents had Internet access at home, which was also the primary access point for the respondents. This result does not necessarily support the conclusion of the respondent's higher socio-economic status (based on the assumption that only those better off can afford the equipment at home), as the income levels of the respondents were low. The majority earned less than 5000 RMB per month, and 36% even less than 1000 RMB.

Despite of the access elsewhere, 46% still preferred to use the Internet café as an access point despite the available access at home, work or school. The vast majority of respondents visited the café at least twice a week, and spent in general more than 7 hours per week in the Internet. Still,

36% spent more than ten hours a week in the Internet, which is in line with the national estimates that give a figure of 15.9 hours (CNNIC 2006).

4.3 Dimensions of the Internet Use

Before analysing the Internet use in the Internet cafes A, B and C, Table 3 below gives a statistical image of the activities in the cafes. The respondents were asked to tell what they most commonly do in an Internet café:

Table 3. Internet Use by Category

| Category | Percentage |
|------------------------------|------------|
| Read and send email | 25% |
| Chat | 54% |
| Play games | 57% |
| Watch movies/listen to music | 46% |
| Just surf | 7% |
| Work/schoolwork | 4% |
| Read news | 14% |
| Search for information | 14% |
| Do Internet shopping | 0% |

As we can see, the proportion of sociability factors (chatting and emailing) and entertainment/pleasure factors (gaming and movies/music) dominate the use of the Internet café. Spending time is the main motivation of accessing the café. The surprising finding is that none of the respondents used Internet cafes as shopping points, although Internet shopping has gained some ground in China. In the following, the different dimensions of Internet use are further examined.

4.3.1 *Pleasure and Entertainment*

The long history of Internet use and the extensive hours spent in the Internet explain why the customers seemed to be “fluent” with the computers, at least in the Internet game context, when observed in the café. Most of the respondents came to the Internet café to spend time (39%), play games, watch movies or listen to music, or chat with friends. Thus it can be concluded that the Internet use in the cafes A, B and C is habitual and ritualistic. Moreover from the uses and gratifications perspective, the use of the Internet is pleasure-seeking, ritualistic and habitual (see Rubin 1984; McQuail 1985; Paparcharissi & Rubin 2000). The proportion of non-habitual,

instrumental use is only very minor, as the Internet café users are not goal-oriented or information-seeking (e.g. the proportion of users who read news or seek information online is small). Instead, their habitualised use of the Internet gratifies diversionary needs or motives.

4.3.2 Sociability or Escape

From the perspective of sociability or avoidance of everyday life and face-to-face communication, the results of the study are two-fold. Mostly, the café remained quiet and the interaction between the customers was minimal, restricted only to occasional conversations between two or more friends that had come to the café together. This finding is in line with the experiences of Laegran and Stewart (2003), who found that the “trendy” or “urban” Internet cafes often lacked the sense of community. The public space, despite of its crowded nature, was used in a very private manner – for personal entertainment and interaction with online friends. However, many of the respondents in the Internet cafes of this study came to the cafes with their friends (36%). The social interaction was partly transferred into the online environment as the friend groups played games together. Thus it can be concluded that the Internet cafes are social spaces both online and offline, and the virtual world is integrated with the space of the café (in line with Laegran 2002:165).

The importance of online sociability was also emphasised. 54% of the respondent came to the café to chat with friends, and 61% agreed that Internet cafes are good places for keeping in touch with friends. One female cafe user had even found her current boyfriend from the Internet. However, only one of the respondents thought that Internet cafés are good for meeting people, and 7% responded that those who often spend time in the cafes do not have real friends. Thus the Internet cafes themselves as offline spaces were not seen as sociable. Consequently, the avoidance of face-to-face communication could be a motivator to use the Internet café for communication. The escape from daily life can be concluded to be one of the motivators, as the entertainment-seeking activities are strongly emphasised.

4.3.3 Personal Identity and Lifestyle

The self-image of the Internet café users turned out to be conflicting. The respondents spend a lot of time online, and they visit the Internet cafes often. The café use is pleasure-seeking and to a

degree individualised. Still, the respondents are worried about the effects of excessive Internet use and possible addiction. When asked about opinions concerning people who often spend time in the Internet cafes, majority expressed concerns related to addiction. Moreover, some even perceived people who excessively spend time in the cafes as potential criminals or otherwise socially unacceptable. The image of the Internet café user seems to be rather negative, and Internet cafes were not seen as fashionable places. Still, 39% said that they access foreign Internet sites. Thus it could be, though questionably, reasoned that one of the motives for Internet use is to acquire foreign (Western) influences for the lifestyle. Nevertheless, some respondents saw that the Internet café users are trendy and modern, and that they are good with computers. This reinforces the assumption that Internet café use can boost or predict the social status of the user as a techno-savvy urbanite (see Lee 1999; Kang 2004).

4.3.4 Control and Concerns

As discussed earlier, a very conflicting result came up when asking the respondent of the problems or concerns related to the Internet café use. Although the respondents mainly spend a lot of time in the Internet, 46% prefer Internet cafes as their primary access point and use the services of the café at least twice a week, they still think that people spend too much time in the Internet cafes. A staggering 64% is concerned about addiction. This mindset and paradox could be explained by that the surveyed users did not perceive themselves as spending “too much” time in the cafes, and that the “often” in the question regarding “people who often spend time in the cafes” is understood as “excessive”. Due to the recent cases of violence set off by Internet gaming, the perceptions of excessive gamers were negative especially outside the Internet café environment. One of the respondent said:

Be careful when you visit the Internet cafes. You shouldn't go alone. Especially if you go there late in the evening. /.../ It can be dangerous... When they (*the café users, gamers*) lose the game, they might get angry. Female, 26.

An interesting result is that many of the respondents were in the line with the Chinese government regarding filtering information, restricting access to certain “harmful” sites, and imposing age limits for accessing the Internet cafes. 54% answered that the government should implement regulations that further restrict minors from entering the cafes. This reflects the general view of the public regarding the problems related to the Internet cafes. These results, combined with the

analysis of what the users do in the Internet cafes, gives a basis for concluding that the levels of both the entertainment orientation and self-censorship amongst the users are high. Only 14% of the respondents visited sites including political information, and there was only one respondent who admitted participating in politically sensitive discussion. Some respondents even saw Internet cafes to be a possible threat to public security and/or a haven for criminal activities.

In regards to the control and supervision of the Internet cafes, the practices of monitoring the use were rather loose. Although the cafés B and C advised the customers in the posters places in the reception or in the computer rooms to show their identification cards when entering the café, this was never put into practise. In café A, ID was never requested. In cafes B and C the ID was either normally not requested or showing it could be easily avoided by telling that “I forgot it home”.

5 CONCLUSION

This study has looked at the Internet café phenomenon in urban Shanghai. The core of the discussion has revolved around the Internet in China, and its implications on the Chinese society. The purpose of the thesis was to understand how the young Shanghainese use the Internet in the 网吧, the Internet café, the demographic determinants that are associated with the use, and the motives and habits related to using the Internet café as an access point to the Internet. The study looked at Internet cafes as technospaces, where the technological, spatial and social dimensions of Internet use are intertwined. In addition, the study examined how these technospaces influence the cultural and socio-political structures of China, and how these structures have shaped the Internet café use.

When examining how the café users use the Internet and what are the motivations behind the use in the Internet café environment, the demographic issues are in explanatory role. The main motivation behind the Internet use seems to be entertainment. The Internet use in the Internet cafes is highly ritualised, habitual and pleasure-seeking. The users gratify their needs for diversion, not the needs to seek information or the needs associated with work. These findings can be related back to the demographic profile of the Internet café users: the users are predominantly youngsters between 18 to 23 years, who have low income levels, and who come to the Internet cafes with their friends to play games – not to seek personal development. The customers of the Internet cafes are dominantly male, as both the official statistics and the results of this study show. There were, however, also females that participated in the same activities as the males; they came to spend time with their friends, playing computer games and chatting. No gender differences were found in the motivations behind the Internet use.

An interesting point is that most of the café users spend significant amount of time in the Internet and Internet cafes per week, but at the same time they state that people who often spend time in the Internet cafes are probably addicted and that it is not socially acceptable to “hang out” in the cafes too much. The concerns related to crossing the limit of habitual gaming to gaming addiction are real. As stated by HRIC, “virtual interactions and needs seem to easily blur the lines of the ‘real’ world” (HRIC 2005). The findings of this study strongly reflect the worrying trend of gaming addiction and the concerns of the public towards the management of the issue. In the Chinese media in general, the gaming addictions have started to gain more attention as the addicts

are dropping out of schools, suffering from physical and psychological symptoms, or even committing suicide. China Daily reported in July 2005 the opening of the first online gaming addiction clinic in Beijing. This negative media attention has only reinforced the government's viewpoints on the eroding effects of the Internet cafes on public morality (China Daily 2005). Thus the government has called for the establishment of a long-term mechanism to monitor the Internet cafes.

When in turn assessing how the state, the culture and the society influence the Internet and the Internet café use, and what are the implications of that use on the state, the culture and the society, it is essential to discuss the extraordinary context of research in this study. Shanghai is an exceptional urban centre in a country of great disparities. Shanghai offers a glimpse to the urban Chinese life that can only be seen in the privileged megacities of eastern China. The income differences between the eastern cities and the rest of the country are widening rapidly. It has been the Chinese government's deliberate decision to boost the development of Shanghai towards the most modern city of the country, in order to make it the showpiece of modern, economically prosperous China. Shanghai has a history of foreign influence, and it has one of the most successful economic development zones of the country, flooded by foreign enterprises. Thus the environment in Shanghai has been attractive for the development of information and communication technologies.

The reception of Internet in China has been overwhelming since the first email in September 1987, and the construction of the country's fibre-optic cable network in the early and mid-1990s. There were a staggering 111 million Internet users in China by the end of year 2005. The Internet use has grown and continues to grow steadily, and it is expected to exceed 200 million users in 2007. The Chinese government has encouraged the diffusion of the Internet in the society, as strong information and communication technology (ICT) skills are essential for the economic development of the country. On the other hand, Internet brings a new battlefield for the censorship apparatus of the government, as monitoring the flow of information is considerably harder than with the printed media. The government has responded to this challenge by adopting far-reaching regulatory and policy measures, which are inevitably conflicting with the goals of building a strong information society by using the ICTs as leapfrog.

Castells (2000) has discussed widely the effects of the new technology on societies. He also acknowledges the interaction of cultural and institutional contexts with the ICT system, but argues

that there is an uncontrollable dimension in the development of the network society, a dimension that is beyond the reach of politics in the globalised communication network. This kind of perspective is supported widely in research related to Internet use. One of the implications of this approach is that there has been a growing number of studies focusing on the democratising and “liberating” effects of the Internet on closed regimes. In the Chinese context, this has generated mixed feeling amongst researchers, as the anticipated undermining impacts of the Internet on the Communist rule in China have proven to be more or less hyped (see for example Kalathil & Boas 2003). First of all, the government has taken wide-spread measures against all kinds of dissent that could be related to the Internet use in China. In addition, the Internet use in China is very much entertainment oriented, and the interests to participate in political dissent relatively low.

In the context of this study, the entertainment orientation was well highlighted. The Internet cafes were places for leisure activities, gaming, and socialising and keeping in touch with friends. In general, the level of self-censorship of the café users was high, and they avoided activities that could have been pointed out as questionable. The users supported the government’s points of view in restricting access of the minors to the cafes, or setting limits to the time spent inside. The support for restricting access to “harmful” sites and was surprisingly strong. In addition, as very few of the respondents had any political agenda, it is hard to see how the Internet cafes in Shanghai would be used for strengthening the civil society and increasing political awareness amongst the users.

So, how have these developments affected the urban youth culture in Shanghai? The youth of Shanghai are exposed to globalisation and foreign values via all aspects of their consumerism. Alongside of the food, clothing and entertainment, the Internet is one of the major channels of diffusing foreign values in to the country. From the point of view that the Internet café that has become a specific arena of youth culture, it can be argued that for some users, the Internet cafes provided a space for reinforcing their identities as trendy and modern urbanites. The consumption-oriented new media culture gives the urban youth the means to endorse such values as freedom and individualism that are not entirely inherent to the traditional Confucian society. Although the values of the traditional Chinese society influence and shape the way the new media is adopted and used, there is a need to understand that Internet has brought about a shift in the cultural arena, and “the plurality of online identities has far surpassed the level of China’s traditional media due to the interactivity of the medium and its ability to reach beyond boundaries of all sorts” (Qiu 2003:16)

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APPENDIX 1. OBSERVATION GUIDE

The observations considered the physical and human environment of the café. The observation topics were:

- Place ,Space and Location: location of the café (neighbourhood, general quality of the surroundings, internal qualities of the café)
- Time: when the observations were made
- Opening hours
- Access to the services: cost, ID policy
- Staff
- Customer base
- Services provided
- Internet connection
- Activities taking place in the café: what is the Internet/computer used for (chatting, gaming, information search, research, etc.)
- Behavioural patterns: atmosphere in the café, interaction between the customers

APPENDIX 2. QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERNET CAFÉ USERS (CHINESE)

您好，我是一名来自瑞典的留学生。我正在做一项有关上海网吧情况的研究。希望您能根据您的实际情况填写这份调查问卷。我真心地感谢您对我的支持。

因特网的使用：（以下问题均可多选，请您根据您的实际情况作答）

1. 您使用因特网已有多长时间了？
 - 少于 1 年
 - 1-3 年
 - 4-6 年
 - 6 年以上
2. 除了网吧之外，您还能在其他什么地方上网吗？
 - 家里
 - 学校
 - 工作单位
 - 其他
3. 您在什么地方使用因特网最多？
 - 网吧
 - 家里
 - 学校
 - 工作单位
 - 其他
4. 大约每周您上网多长时间
 - 少于 1 小时
 - 1-3 小时
 - 4-6 小时
 - 7-10 小时
 - 大于 10 小时
5. 您大概多长时间去一次网吧
 - 很少去
 - 一个月几次
 - 一周一次
 - 一周 2-6 次
 - 每天
6. 您为什么去网吧？
 - 除此之外，没有别的地方可以上网
 - 消磨时间
 - 网速快
 - 和朋友一起去
 - 方便
 - 去网吧是一种潮流
 - 在网吧，IP 可以匿名
 - 在网吧，没有人监督
7. 您在网吧通常做些什么？
 - 收发邮件
 - 网上聊天
 - 玩游戏
 - 看电影或者听音乐
 - 网上冲浪而以
 - 工作
 - 看新闻
 - 搜索信息
 - 网上购物

8. 您觉得网吧对以下那个有好处

- 查找信息
- 和朋友联系
- 见见人
- 学些有关电脑的知识
- 打发时间

9. 您觉得下列哪类问题与网吧有关系?

- 网速慢
- 网站打不开
- 网吧消费太贵
- 一些网吧已被取缔
- 网吧是犯罪多发地带
- 人们花太多时间在网吧
- 网吧威胁社会治安

10. 您是否

- 浏览外国站点
- 浏览色情网站
- 浏览与政治信息有关的网站
- 参与政治敏感话题的讨论

11. 您觉得政府和网吧应该

- 不允许未成年人使用网吧
- 限制有害的站点
- 不允许 24 小时营业
- 限制人们带在网吧里的时间
- 有严格的规定
- 有较宽松的规定

12. 对经常留恋网吧的人您怎么看

- 他们是新新人类

- 他们没有真正的朋友
- 他们是令人讨厌的人
- 他们是擅于电脑的人
- 他们沉溺其中
- 他们可能问题人群

您的个人资料:

性别

- 男
- 女

年龄

- 小于 18 岁
- 18-23 岁
- 24-29 岁
- 30 岁以上

学历

- 小学
- 高中
- 职高
- 本科
- 硕士或硕士以上

月收入

- 低于 1000
- 1000-5000
- 5001-10 000
- 大于 10 000

对于你的帮助，我再次表示由衷地感谢！

APPENDIX 3. QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERNET CAFÉ USERS (ENGLISH)

Hi! I am a student from Sweden and I make research about Internet cafes in Shanghai. I would be very happy if you could answer a few questions. It will only take a couple of minutes.

INTERNET USE Select the options (one or more) that describe you the best.

1. How long have you been using the Internet?

- less than a year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- more than 6 years

2. Can you access the Internet somewhere else than in an Internet café?

- home
- school
- work
- somewhere else

3. Where do you most commonly use the Internet?

- Internet café
- home
- school
- work
- somewhere else

4. How many hours per week do you use the Internet?

- less than 1 hour
- 1-3 hours

- 4-6 hours
- 7-10 hours
- more than 10 hours

5. How often do you visit an Internet café?

- seldom
- a couple of times a month
- once a week
- 2-6 times a week
- every day

6. Why do you come to an Internet café?

- no Internet access elsewhere
- to spend time
- faster connection
- I come with friends
- it is convenient
- it is trendy
- I can access the Internet anonymously
- there is less supervision than elsewhere

7. What do you do in the Internet café?

- read and send email
- chat
- play games
- watch movies/listen to music
- just surf
- work/schoolwork
- read news
- search for information
- do Internet shopping

8. Do you think that Internet cafes are good for

- searching for information
- keeping in touch with friends
- meeting people
- learning more about computers
- spending time

9. What kind of problems do you think are related to Internet cafes?

- slow connection
- the Internet sites do not open
- Internet cafes are expensive
- some Internet cafes have been shut down
- Internet cafes can be used for criminal activities
- people spend too much time in the cafes
- Internet cafes are a threat to public security

10. Do you ever

- visit foreign Internet sites
- visit pornographic sites
- visit sites with political information
- participate in politically sensitive discussion

11. Do you think that the government and the Internet cafes

- should not allow minors to use the café
- should limit access to harmful sites
- should not be open 24 hours a day
- should limit the time that people stay in the Internet café
- should have strict regulations
- should have loose regulations

12. What do you think about people who often spend time in an Internet café?

- they are trendy and modern

- they do not have real friends
- they are nerds
- they are good with computers
- they are addicted
- they are dangerous (criminal) people

DEMOGRAPHICS**Gender**

- male
- female

Age

- under 18
- 18-23 years
- 24-29 years
- 30 years or over

Education

- primary school
- high school
- vocational education
- university (Bachelor)
- university (Master) or above

Monthly income

- less than 1000 RMB
- 1000-5000 RMB
- 5001-10 000 RMB
- more than 10 000 RMB

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!