

Lund University

Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies

Master's Program in Asian Studies

China Studies

Spring Semester, 2009

**BEING “NON-MAINSTREAM”
IN CHINESE CYBERSPACE:
FZL SUBCULTURE ON THE INTERNET**

Author: Pianzhou Zhou

Supervisor: Arianne Gaetano

ABSTRACT

The rise of the FZL (*feizhuliu*) subculture was one of the most eye-catching cultural phenomena in the Chinese cyberspace between 2007 and 2008. It has been considered as vulgar, destructive and problematic by the masses. The purpose of this research was to offer a fresh perspective and insightful view into the FZL subculture. It also was aimed to contribute to the studies of the intersection of subcultures and the Internet, and the understanding of social inclusion in Chinese cyberspace. The central research questions were raised: “What was the relation between the Internet and the FZL subculture?” and “How was FZL “non-mainstream? How did FZL resist mainstream norms and values?” The research was mainly designed in qualitative methods with inductive fashion. The primary data came from online participant observation in Yupsky.com, Tieba.baidu.com, and FZLGO.com, the websites dedicated to the FZL subculture and online personal spaces run by FZL subculturalists. The research found out that the Internet is the only social space where a FZL identity can be acquired, and to be a FZL subculturalist is to engage with the Internet and create an online FZL identity. The findings also revealed that FZL’s identities are totally different and even contradictory with the norms and values shared by the mainstream Chinese netizens.

Keywords: non-mainstream, cyberspace, China, FZL, subculture, subculturalist, Internet, identity, netizen

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
1.1. Research background: the rise of the “Non-mainstream” in the Chinese Cyberspace.....	4
1.2. Research problem and research questions.....	6
1.3. Research purpose and the significance of the research.....	7
1.4. Research design and methods adopted.....	8
1.4.1. <i>Design of the study</i>	8
1.4.2. <i>Methods of selection</i>	9
1.4.3. <i>Reliability and validity</i>	10
1.4.4. <i>Criticism of the sources</i>	10
1.4.5. <i>Ethical considerations</i>	11
1.5. Thesis Disposition.....	11
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	
2.1. Subcultures and the Internet.....	12
2.2. FZL subculture and its representations.....	14
3. 3. FZL SUBCULTURE AND THE INTERNET.....	15
3.1. Major resources for online FZL identity construction.....	15
3.2. FZL portraits.....	17
4. HOW IS FZL NON-MAINSTREAM.....	20
4.1. “FZL portraits”, a non-mainstream type of online avatars.....	20
4.2. FZL “Mars language”, a non-mainstream Internet language.....	25
5. CONCLUSION.....	29
REFERENCES.....	31

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research background: the rise of the “Non-mainstream” in the Chinese Cyberspace

The Internet is developing rapidly in China, and its proliferation has brought in large numbers of Chinese citizens with diverse backgrounds into Chinese cyberspace. As the 23rd CNNIC report¹ shows, by the end of 2008, the total number of Chinese netizens had reached 298 million, with a yearly growth rate of 41.9%. This number took up 22.6% of the Chinese population, which was appreciably higher than the global average of 21.9%, indicating another significant achievement of the internet popularization in China since the total scale of Chinese internet users topped that of the Americans' and became the largest in the world in June 2008.

Chinese internet users are becoming a more diversified group as well. While the under-30 male adults from the city with higher education was the majority in cyberspace when the internet was just introduced to China, it has been losing its dominance in recent years as the proliferation of internet among people from the country side, the less educated, the female, the adolescent youth and the elders has been going at a higher speed. Most notably is the increase of adolescent youth in the Chinese netizens². According to the CNNIC 23rd report, the percentage of 10-19 year-olds increased to 35.2% in the end of 2008, beating the 31.5% of the group 20-29. This was a major shift, as a year before they had been still 28.7% and 38.1% to the advantage of the elders. Besides saying that the under-20 internet users just turned into the biggest age group, a comparison of the statistics from 2006 to 2008 would also tell us that the percentage of the netizens who were born after 1989 was 17.2% in

¹ <http://www.cnnic.cn/index/OE/00/11/index.htm>, report on January 2007 and January 2009

² In the report, “netizen” is defined as a Chinese citizen with the age of 6 or above who has used the Internet in the past 6 months

the end of 2006, which became a more-than-doubled 35.6% two years later¹.

As Chinese cyberspace has been growing fast in terms of both size and diversity, a new youth subculture started to catch people's attention on the Chinese Internet. Since the mid 2007, the label *feizhuliu* (FZL) began to appear in hyperlinks everywhere, clicking which would lead you to various kinds of websites, forums, and online personal spaces filled with texts and images that were seemingly from some youth alternative scenes. The word "*feizhuliu*" can be literally translated as "non-mainstream", and when it comes to culture, it commonly stands for "alternative". In this sense, it is natural to think that this cyberspace "*feizhuliu*" were simply some alternative subcultures, such as Punk and Goth, which had prevailed again taking advantage of going online.

However, it did not seem to be the case. Firstly, although certain alternative subculture contents, such as pictures of Punk looking youths, dark, obscure images and words, etc could be found in the FZL² websites, FZL was not a subculture that centered around certain types of music or dressing styles: the music they listened to could be of any genres and as popular as any Pop songs, and the youngsters in the FZL pictures dressed and posed only in order to be fashionable or cute most of the times, rather than to cling to certain alternative styles. Secondly, computer and internet technologies not only built up new media platforms and virtual social spaces for the FZL participants to express themselves and interact with each other, but also were intrinsic parts of it: a FZL participant was one who upload "FZL portraits" of oneself, which were computer-modified digital pictures, to the Internet, and one who wrote in "FZL language", a computer-generated language, to communicate with others in the cyberspace.

¹ In the CNNIC report published in the end of 2006, it provides the percentage of internet users under 18 years old, while in the end of 2008, the statistics were on the age group of below 20. Therefore, the change in percentage of the 'born after 1989' can be concluded.

² In the following article "FZL" will be used to replace "*feizhuliu*".

As is to say, FZL was not just a subculture on the Internet, but a cyber subculture in which the Internet played a pivotal role. Although FZL was not a subculture based on a spectacular kind of music or dressing style, it was just as non-normative and marginal as other subcultures. Since its emergence, adverse voices from the “cyber public” Chinese Internet users never ceased. The major representations of FZL subculture, such as the “FZL portraits” and “FZL writings” received mockeries, criticisms, and even harsh abuses on almost very websites and forums. The common Chinese netizens generally considered FZL a passive and destructive subculture that would harm the development of the youth participants and finally lead to the degradation of the Chinese civilization. An anti-FZL movement¹ had even been waged aiming at guiding the FZL youth onto the “right track”.

1.2 Research problem and research questions

With the proliferation of internet in China, physical access to computers and internet connections has been gained by an increasing number of Chinese citizens, and especially among the youth, the rural, the less educated and females who had been marginalized in Chinese cyberspace. Therefore, the bridge across what we call “digital divide” between the “haves” and “have-nots” is being established. And as many consider the Internet as intrinsically anti-hierarchy, to get everyone in to the cyberspace would help people overcome socioeconomic or cultural differences and have equal opportunities to participate in politics, social activities and culture making. However, as Tim Jordan (1999) argues, any individual or group that takes action in the cyberspace is consciously confronting or unconsciously working within a certain “social structure” of cyberculture. And the social structure of Chinese cyberculture is that it has been dominated by well-educated male under 30 who are in the cities, and conducted in languages and norms to their advantages. As is to say, for those who do not belong to this dominant group and are incompetent with the prevailing

¹ Since the emergence of the FZL subculture on the Chinese Internet, a group of FZL-haters formed their own online forums and virtual communities to conduct all kinds of activities that were ‘anti-FZL’, which was also how they labeled themselves

communicative language and norm in Chinese cyberspace, their engagement with the Internet would likely to result in the formation of cybersubcultures, so that both hierarchies offline and online can be fought against. In this sense, the rise of the FZL subculture among the youth netizens became an intriguing issue and aroused the current research problem: how FZL participants interacted with the Internet to challenge the hierarchies that were to their adversity, and what we could learn from it about social inclusion and equality in the cyberspace. Accordingly, the following questions were raised and addressed in the current research:

- a. What was the relation between the Internet and the FZL subculture?
- b. How was FZL “non-mainstream”? How did FZL resist mainstream norms and values?

1.3. Research purpose and the significance of the research

The significance of the research is multiple. Firstly, the rise of the FZL subculture was one of the most eye-catching cultural phenomena in the Chinese cyberspace between 2007 and 2008. Brought to the table by the talks and narrations from those who saw it as vulgar and destructive, it has been subjected to adverse labeling and considered problematic by the masses. There have been numerous reports on the representations of FZL from both online and offline media, and some scholarly papers on them as well. But most of them only looked at it as a youth subculture that had the potential of becoming a threat to the development of adolescent youth while few examined it as a “cyber” subculture that was the result of the interplay of the Internet and our society. Therefore, my research can hopefully offer a fresh perspective and illuminating insight into the FZL subculture, the studies of which have been handicapped due to bias and stereotyping.

Secondly, with the introduction and proliferation of the Internet in our societies, the focus of subcultural, especially youth subcultural studies has shifted accordingly from

the role of music and dressing styles to that of the Internet. As the Internet has brought such extensive and profound impact on human communications, the outlines of existing subcultures have notably changed, and the rises of various “cybersubcultures” have been witnessed. These changes have pushed us to look at the Internet as not only a new media platform and the technical support for virtual communities, but also the sources of new identities constructions and hierarchies which lead directly to the formation of subcultures. Therefore, the current research will contribute to the studies of the intersection of subcultures and the Internet, and hopefully bring a fresh perspective to the table.

Thirdly, by studying a “non-mainstream” subculture in Chinese cyberspace, the current research was also concerned with issue of social inclusion in the digital age. While “digital divide” has been the prevailing metaphor which drives governments around the world to provide computers and Internet connections to the “have-nots”, scholars begin to notice that the inequality issue ahead, however it is addressed, is way beyond hardware divide. Multiple factors have been keeping certain people from making good use of the Internet and getting involved in the cyberspace politics and culture making. Through studying a cybersubculture with most of its participants under-educated youths, who have long been marginalized and even silenced in the mainstream cyberculture, the findings would help understand the problems of social inclusion in Chinese cyberspace and contribute to seeking solutions.

1.4. Research design and methods adopted

1.4.1. Design of the study

To explore the current phenomenon of FZL subculture on the Internet with an insightful view, the research was mainly designed in qualitative methods with an inductive fashion. My primary data mainly came from online observation and online participant in the websites dedicated to the FZL subculture and the online personal

spaces run by FZL subculturalists.

1.4.2. Methods of selection

To gain a general idea about the numerous and varied FZL websites, the Internet searching engine “Google” was utilized in finding websites relevant to the FZL subculture. By visiting these websites randomly, I had a general idea about what different kinds of FZL websites were like. Letting the hyperlinks guide my way in the big, interconnected online FZL network, three websites were finally identified as the major research sites: Yupsky.com, Tieba.baidu.com, and FZLGO.com, which represent the three major types of FZL websites.

Yupsky.com is one of the best and most typical FZL online communities dedicated to help FZL participants expressing FZL identities and making friends with each other. After free registration, one could have its own “space” as a site where all kinds of resources like avatar pictures, music, flashes, texts, etc could be utilized to construct a full-fledged online identity and where other people can visit and interact with them. Besides supporting online personal spaces for its users, Yupsky held a FZL star-making competition monthly to select the “FZL masters” who had the most appealing avatar pictures and best decorated personal spaces. This “FZL masters” would become star users of the website attracting more visitors and making more friends. Tieba.baidu.com is one of the biggest online forums in Chinese cyberspace where sub-forums can be freely established with different themes. The FZL sub-forum is the online forum dedicated for FZL subculture in Chinese cyberspace, having around 70000 registered users (<http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%B7%C7%D6%F7%C1%F7>, accessed on February 2009). Registered users of the forum can also have an online personal space as a site to express one’s online identity, and both FZL and non-FZL users of Tieba.baidu.com could discuss what interested them in the forum. Not like the other two websites, FZLGO.com is not an interactive website but a typical one of the hundreds of

websites dedicated to publish the latest information that would interest the FZL subculturalists such as instructing FZL subculturalists how to make good use of all kinds of Internet resources to create appealing avatar pictures and well-decorated personal spaces and those introducing to them the latest FZL “celebrities” and their online spaces. From January 2009 to June 2009, regular visits were paid to this websites and sometimes other webpage hyper-linked with them that had something to do with the FZL subculture as well.

1.4.3 Reliability and validity

To get exactly the answers for what I intended to investigate, I also registered in the two interactive websites and attempted to create my own online FZL identity so that I can have a better understanding of the FZL subculture. This was somewhat like a participant observation, but the interactions with other FZL participants were minimum. On one hand, this may have hampered my understandings of the FZL subculturalists and kept me from delving deeper in their perceptions, motives, and values. But on the other hand, as the purpose of the research was mainly exploring the FZL subculturalists’ interaction with the Internet and through what they were represented as “non-mainstream”, the disadvantages from not participating in the subculture were to an acceptable extend, and I was freed from the risks of going local

1.4.4. Criticism of the sources

Doing online research, I am highly aware that criticism of the source is very important in collecting and analyzing data. Confronting a numerous information on the Internet, I always kept a skeptical attitude and constantly checked the authors behind the posts and the correctness of what had been published. During the 5 months of online observation, a large number of first hand data were collected, which mainly included pictures and texts from the FZL websites and personal spaces. In this process, data were collected and records were kept on the two major identifiers of the online FZL

identity: the “FZL portraits” and “FZL writings”. The focus was on how they were generated, how FZL subculturalists interacted with them and used them to express themselves. Then these collected data were analyzed in the framework how a FZL identity was constructed on the Internet, how this identity construction was different and “non-mainstream”, and what are the mainstream norms and values it resisted.

1.4.5. Ethical consideration

In respect to ethical principle, I accessed the information which is widely open to the public. Some pictures used in this research as illustrations are popular in the Chinese cyberspace and even officially posted by their authors. However, to avoid the burden of ethical dilemma, let me not mention their names.

1.5. Thesis Disposition

First, taking FZL as a cybersubculture, the role the Internet played in the formation of FZL will be carefully examined. Besides looking at online FZL communities and networks, the focus will be put on how FZL identities were constructed and maintained through interacting with the Internet. Then a closer look of the major resources for online FZL identity construction, FZL avatars and FZL writings, will be made, and the accessibility of the resources will be discussed. After examining the relation between FZL subculture and the Internet, the thesis will proceed to tackle the question how FZL was “non-mainstream”. By contrasting the values reflected in the means through which FZL identities were constructed with the “mainstream” norms and values, what the FZL subculture challenged, how they challenged them and why will be discussed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Subcultures and the Internet

With the introduction and proliferation of the Internet, in recent years, subcultural studies have shifted their focus from dressing style and the consumption of music to the increasing role of Internet in subcultural formations. Carrying the question whether the proliferation of the Internet will melt the cultural and subcultural boundaries by offering a taste of everything to everyone in the cyberspace, Paul Hodkinson (2002) studied the impact the Internet brought to the Goth subculture. By looking into the interactions between Goth participants in the online Goth websites, he argues that the Internet usually function in the same way as Goth events to concentrate their involvement in the Goth scene and to reinforce the boundaries of the grouping, and the means by which websites and discussion groups are accessed could have the effect of clustering them together and encourage them to pursue existing interests rather than to discover new ones (Hodkinson, 2002).

Other studies of existing subcultures in the Internet age have found out that not only has the Internet facilitated the grouping of subculturalists and their involvement in the subcultural scenes, it also to different extends changes the subcultures themselves. In his study of the participants in an Internet forum established for the Straight Edge subculturalists, Williams (Williams, 2006) noticed that there were at least two types of straightedgers presenting in the Internet forum: those who used the forum as a supplement to participation in a face-to-face music scene and those whose internet use was a primary or sole source of subcultural participation. Through his analysis, he argues that for some subculturalists the Internet is more than a medium but also a social space through which personal and social identities are constructed, given meaning, and shared through the ritual of computer-mediated interaction. In other words, the Internet has become a new Straight Edge scene in which the identity of being a straightedger is maintained through participation in the forums rather than in the offline music Straight Edge music scene (Williams, 2006).

McArthur's study of the "geeks" who affiliated through using online chat rooms furthers the argument for the Internet as a resource and medium for subcultural

development. He argues that although physical interaction and the tangible sense of style are lost for the subcultures in the cyberspace, these elements are re-created in virtual ways. Styles become digital, and the physical interactions are replaced by access to the Internet (McArthur, 2009). And in Caspary and Manzenreiter's study of "the Japanese Noise subculture and the Internet", how the new media have been incorporated into the subculture's production modes, distribution chains, communication channels, and meta-narratives were examined (Caspary, 2003). The authors borrowed David Bell's conceptualization of "cyberculture" and analyzed the social side of the Internet technology and its influence on creating a distinctive subculture made up of an alliance of artists and fans, producers and consumers. All these empirical studies of subculture and the Internet have demonstrated conceptual importance of "cybersubcultures" in studying subcultures in this cyber age, which was defined by Bell as social formations that either signal an expressive relationship to digital technology or make use of it to further their particular project (Bell, 2001). To understand these cybersubcultures, a thorough study of their interplay with the Internet is a must. Yet this is just what has been lacking in the existing studies of FZL subculture in China.

2.2. FZL subculture and its representations

Being a newly emerged subculture on the Internet, although FZL has caught the eyes of many Chinese netizens and aroused big discussions, debates and even fights in the cyberspace, there have only been limited scholarly studies on it. Taking FZL as a youth culture originated from the Internet, Ping Ma's "rudimentary analysis" of the FZL subculture managed to give the whole FZL subculture a rough portrait (Ma, 2008). In her article, the Internet is identified as the FZL subculture's most important source, while the youth are considered its main participants, and its major representations are spotted as eye-catching FZL pictures and "Mars language"¹.

¹ *Huoxing wen*, a word used to refer to all kinds of words and expressions that are not part of standard Chinese language therefore seem 'alien' to common people. It is also used to refer to the non-standard

Concerned with the development of Chinese youth in the cyber age, the author further makes a general analysis of the positive and negative impact this subculture would have on youth development, why youth would be attracted to this subculture and what should be done to prevent the negative impact it has on the youth (Ma, 2008). Similar arguments were made by Chunjun Ai (Ai, 2009) after studying 1000 youngsters and their engagement with the FZL subculture, yet the author has a more negative opinion and takes it as an “aberrance of the unhealthy Internet culture” and “an adolescent version of the passive and decadent culture” (Ai, 2009:50).

The major contribution of these two researches is that the study of FZL is separated from the studies of other “non-mainstream” subcultures or alternative art trends, and the major characteristic of FZL, that it was a youth subculture originated from the cyberspace was agreed on. However, strongly influenced by the studies of youth development and lacked insights of the relation between FZL subculture and the Internet, these studies fail to give FZL an impartial and thorough examination, and their investigations into the representations of FZL subculture, “Mars language” and FZL avatar, are very general and even superficial. Luckily being a new type of Chinese Internet language, “Mars language” has received the attention of quite a few journalists and scholars interested in Internet language. As one of the earliest journalism reports on “Mars language”, Jianwei Li (Li, 2007:12) identifies “Mars language” as “a combination of symbols, traditional Chinese characters, Japanese characters, and rarely used characters, sometimes include dialects and graphics”, and claimed it to be an expression of the personalities and uniqueness of the adolescent youth (Li, 2007). In Qi Sun’s article “Finding the root of ‘Mars language’” (Sun, 2008) similar arguments are made as the root of ‘Mars language’ is claimed to be nothing else but the Chinese characters and its culture, while the author argues that “Mars language” is popularized by the invention of certain software programs that can transform standard Chinese into “Mars language” and satisfies the entertainment needs of the youth.

Chinese used by FZL subculturalists specifically.

Besides defining “Mars language” and tracing its root, other scholars have tried to tackle it with a subcultural perspective, taking the usage of it as a kind of youth subculture that defies the language norms in the adult world and serves to bring youth with similar mentality together (Dong, 2008; Yang, 2008; Chen, 2009). The above researches have managed to sketch the general figure of “Mars language” and have made some valuable findings about its origins and characters. However, in this research, “Mars language” is still taken as a subcategory or new type of Chinese Internet language phenomena which is specially appealing to the youth, no scholar has attempted to make a careful comparison between it and other, or “traditional” types of Chinese Internet language phenomena. In Chen’s research, the boundary of “Mars language” is even expanded to include other types of Internet language used by the Chinese youth which seem “alien” to the adults (Chen, 2009), which reflects the lack of a clear differentiation between this “Mars language” used by FZL subculturalists and the Internet language used by “mainstream” netizens has been missing, which definitely got in the way of capturing the distinctness and essence of “Mars language”.

3. FZL SUBCULTURE AND THE INTERNET

3.1. Major resources for online FZL identity construction

As most netizens and scholars have noticed, FZL subculturalists are taking good advantage of the Internet to gather up, expressing themselves and interacting with each other. They utilize online chatting programs like Tencent QQ to communicate with each other, and form “QQ groups”, which are somewhat like online chatting rooms with comparatively stable members, to gather in groups. Most of them also run online blogs and other personal websites to publish personal photographs and writings, and actively visit each other’s personal websites to share their interests, meet each other, and make friends. Online forums in the name FZL subculture also blossom. In

the biggest Chinese online community “Baidu Post Bar” (baidu tieba)¹, a “FZL Bar” was established and has grown into the biggest FZL forum with around 70000 registered users. Other than “FZL Bar”, there are still quite a few other FZL forums, not to mention the hundreds of FZL websites found to meet the interests of the FZL participants. Thanks to the hyper links, these FZL blogs, personal spaces, forums, communities, and interest websites are interconnected, and together form a big FZL network, which function as the social space a subculture needs in order to maintain sufficient interaction among its members.

However, what many people have mistaken is that, just like what Williams observed for some online straightedgers (Williams, 2006), for most of the FZL subculturalists, the FZL online spaces are not a supplement for their subcultural interests in the face-to-face world, but the only FZL scene they engage in, and where their identities as “FZL” exist. As is to say, the FZL participants are not subculturalists who log on to the Internet, but youth who log on to the Internet to become subculturalists. This is firstly because that all the FZL communities only exist in the form of virtual communities, no one ever spotted one in the offline life. Therefore, the Internet provides the only social space where these FZL youth gather, interact, and conduct subcultural activities. While most importantly, the way in which a FZL identity is constructed can hardly be replicate in the offline life.

As Tim Jordan (Jordan, 1999) argues, most of us enter the cyberspace as individuals, and what we experience of the cyberspace is primarily sitting in front of a computer, log on to certain websites, and interact with others. Without physically being there, you do not exist in the cyberspace as yourself, but commonly as one or different online identities. These online identities are constructed using different Internet resources in different ways, depending on where you are in the cyberspace. Most basically, you would have to be registered as a user of an interactive website and have at least a name to signify your very existence. Then other resources, such as email

¹ <http://tieba.baidu.com/>

address, signature, personal profile, avatar¹, and style of writing may be utilized to construct a full-fledged online identity.

In different kinds of the cyberspaces, different resources may be used, and in different fashions. On websites like MySpace or Facebook, these online identities tend to be constructed as virtual replicas of the persons in real life, while in MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games) like World of Warcraft, the construction of identities are fantasy-prone. Being recognized as a FZL is also about constructing an identity on the Internet. Registering in a FZL forum or community and being an active member would surely make people prone to consider you a FZLer. However, without constructing your identity properly, you can still be identified as an outsider. For FZL identities, there are two critical identifiers: “FZL headshots” and “Mars language”. “FZL headshots” are used as a FZL identity’s avatar² pictures, while “Mars language” is used in writing aliases, signatures, self-descriptions, logs, etc.

3.2 FZL portraits

A “FZL headshot” firstly is a digital photograph taken of a person’s head, yet it is not just any digital headshot, but one of a person obviously posing to the camera and one that is evidently modified by computer software. In most “FZL headshots”, the people in the pictures are posing directly to the lens, indicating the awareness and willingness of being caught in the camera. And a closer look of the pictures will disclose that many of them were taken by the portrayed people themselves: in some of them the arms are obviously holding up a camera, while in some others the existence of a mirror, a desk, or the scenes of bedrooms and internet cafes show that the person in the picture was very likely by itself, using the reflection of a mirror or a webcam to take the picture. As most of the FZL participants were adolescent youth in their prime,

¹ Avatar is a digital representation of a person or being, as used in online communities such as Second Life (according to wikipedia)

these “FZL headshots” were not just to visualize their online identities, but to make them look as good as possible. The attempts to do so certainly include dressing up, making up, posing right, and giving a good camera work. But in a digital space, nothing works as effective as computer modification. To modify these digital headshots was traditionally referred to as to “PS” them, namely using the software Photoshop to edit them. There were many articles on the FZL websites regarding how to use Photoshop to make the headshot pictures look better and add certain special effects to them.

However, even with this kind of technical guidance, how to handle Photoshop can still be incomprehensible to some people, and even they can understand it, the complexity of handling a professional graphic processing program may nevertheless hold them back from actually doing so. Therefore, a certain software program “Pretty Picture Show” (*mei tu xiu xiu*) was developed to meet the needs of easy “FZL headshot” production, which, instead of Photoshop, was massively used by the FZL participants. In an article titled “To make a shiny FZL picture in one minute” circulated among many FZL websites, the author gives a detailed instruction how to use “Pretty Picture Show” to quickly make a well-modified FZL headshot, while acknowledges “do not ask me about PS, because I don’t know how to use it either”. Like most other photo processing programs, “Pretty Picture Show” has the basic picture modification functions such as adjusting color, contrast, brightness, size, etc, but it also provides other functions developed specially for modifying digital pictures in the ways youth, especially girls would like to, including “headshot beautification” (*renxiang meirong*) and adding colorful ornaments, texts, and flash effect into the pictures. These functions are introduced to the readers in article mentioned above, especially “headshot beautification”, which enables the user to change the color of the eyes, make the skin smoother, add longer eyelashes, and put up make ups to the face. “Pretty Picture Show” also had a very user-friendly interface, making it easy for almost anyone to become a proficient user in a short while without having to possess any pre-knowledge in using professional graphic editing programs like Photoshop. As

a result, most “FZL headshots” were modified with programs like “Pretty Picture Show” rather than Photoshop, as they often had the “shiny” effects Photoshop could not provide.



Photo 1 and 2: Examples of FZL portraits

3.3. FZL writing resource: Mars language

Besides using avatars pictures, a FZL identity can also be constructed in a text-only environment using “traditional” resources like names (or aliases), signatures, and blog writings. And for a name, signature, or a blog article to be recognized as from a FZL, the content of it matters much less than its “look”. Instead of using standard Chinese characters, they are commonly written in a “mutant font” (*yi ti zi*), which by the first look might appear like a whole new language. Therefore, it is commonly addressed as “Mars language” (*huoxing wen*) for it seems alien to “normal people from the earth”. Although addressed as a “language”, as Sun (Sun, 2008) argues, it still has its root in

Chinese. It is more of a new font of Chinese characters than a bunch of new words and phrases. It is a new system where most standard Chinese characters could find their counterparts either as traditional Chinese, Japanese, Latin letters, or simply any icons. Therefore, the creation of “Mars language” is more or less looking for rarely used characters or other icons to replace the normative Chinese characters, thus generating “new looks” but not “new meanings”. Therefore, it is orally the same with normal Chinese mandarin, and few people can tap them into the computer with a normal Chinese input program or write them down with a pen, despite what the pioneers of “Mars language” users may have done. The prevalence of “Mars language” among certain groups of people such as the FZL started when its inputting in large scale became technologically possible and convenient: various websites emerged offering the service of transforming words and sentences in standard Chinese characters into deviated forms, followed by the invention of a software program called “Mars language input” (*huoxingwen shurufa*), which is a pinyin based Chinese input software program that generates “Mars language” instead of standard Chinese characters.

每天想念你已成为一种习惯

莓天想唵祢巳成儻1.种溜惯

Standard Chinese characters (on the left) and in “mutant font” (on the right)

4. HOW FZL IS NON-MAINSTREAM

4.1. “FZL portraits”, a non-mainstream type of online avatars

4.1.1 *FZL portraits do not necessarily have a non-mainstream style*

In the FZL avatar pictures, it is obvious that there are certain shared characteristics in the dressing and posing style of the FZL youth. Many FZLers have haircuts or dresses in the Punk or Goth style, while some others, especially girls, commonly dress up in

ways similar to that of the Goth/Lolita subculture from Japan that would make them look cute and adorable princesses. This has made many people consider that FZL is centered with certain “dressing styles that cannot be accepted by the masses”¹, if not a single style. This perception does reflect part of the reality, as in many FZL avatar pictures, the youth do dress up extravagantly: huge fluffy hair, stage-costume-like clothes, blackish eye shadow, multiple earrings, and even nose rings. And there have been many mockeries and criticisms from other netizens from non-FZL online forums and communities on the “monster looks” of certain FZL avatars.

However, not all FZL avatars are with non-mainstream styles, and most importantly, dressing up in styles that contradict the mainstream value is not the intention of the FZLers. In most FZL websites and communities, there are always sections where articles on how to make up, do the hair, make up. In Yupsky, there is webpage name “In” (*chao shang guan*)², where articles are published introducing the latest and most fashionable (*chao, shishang*) clothes, hair styles, and the good looking FZL avatars pictures. In these articles, the pictures used to illustrate the latest “FZL” hair cuts and clothes are largely those from the youth fashion magazines, and introduced to the readers as “hottest”, “latest”, and most “in” styles. In a word, though alternative art styles could be seen in the FZL avatar pictures, the FZL subculture does not cling to a certain style, and does not aim to resist the mainstream aesthetic taste. They are fond of fashionable hairstyles and clothing, but their taste of them is nothing really different, at least not compared with youth of their own age. It is just a reflection of the current youth consumption culture. What is “non-mainstream” about the “FZL portraits” is not the dressing style, but its role as an online identity’s avatar and the most important identifier of a FZL identity.

4.1.2. Chinese Internet users seldom use their own photographs as their online avatars

¹ <http://baike.baidu.com/view/11222.htm>

² in.yepsky.com

Avatars are electronic image that represent computer users and can be modified by computer users (Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d., 2007). As the capacity of Internet servers and the bandwidth of Internet connections grow, avatars are used much more than before in online identity construction. While in the past, most websites, forums, chatting rooms and instant chatting software programs only allowed the user to choose an under-sized image from a fix selection to be the avatar, nowadays Internet users are free to choose digital pictures of much bigger size to visualize their online identities. On different websites and among different Internet users, the choosing of avatars varies. But generally speaking, it is commonly either a photograph of the Internet user itself, or any image that one likes to use that may reflect its certain traits, characters, interests, etc. When the real look of a person is shown, it is most likely that online identity one attempts to construct is just itself in the offline life. This is the commonly the case when one is on websites like Xiaonei.com or Kaixin.com, when the purpose of the Internet usage is to supplement offline social connections. In this circumstance, one is even using its real name, therefore very likely to use its own photograph as well. Except for this situation, using one's own photographs as avatar is rare choice.

For the other, as the popular saying among Chinese Internet users goes, "Looking ugly is not your fault, but coming out to scare others is." Even though one is very confident about its look and wants to show its pictures to others, it is better to keep it low, as is to say, not to make up, dress up, and pose up to flaunt in front of others. Since you can not guarantee not to look ugly to anyone, being too showy could easily be blamed with the fault of "coming out to scare others". A good example is the case of the notorious online character "lotus sister" (*furong jiejie*), who considered herself beautiful and put up series of her pictures posing extravagantly in various online forums, and finally became a big laugh in the whole Chinese cyberspace and received relentless mockeries and vituperations.

4.1.3. Fake beauty phenomenon

In the FZL subculture, however, almost everyone uses the pictures of themselves as avatars, even though their online identities are almost never their offline identities: they do not use their real name, and commonly fill their personal profiles with obviously false information, such as “Location: Sky”, “Occupation: Dreamer”, etc. Not only do they use their own photographs as avatar pictures, making good “FZL portraits” and showing them to others is central to being a FZL subculturalists. In the online personal spaces¹ supported by the FZL online community “Yupsky”², the avatar picture and a “photo album” full of other “FZL portraits” of the person dressing and posing differently, are always central to the webpage, giving visitors a first, direct, and visualized impression of what the owner of the space is like. And the “Yupsky” community hosts a “FZL master” (*feizhuliu daren*) competition monthly, in which any register user with a “FZL portrait” of itself can participate. Then the pictures of all the contestants will be exhibited and the ones receive the most votes from other community members will be the winners, with their pictures (which are hyper-linked to their personal spaces) in the front page of the “FZL master” section of the website. This kind of FZL beauty pageant for the FZL avatars is hosted by other online FZL communities as well. And the pictures of the “FZL masters” and their online profiles (like names, the address of personal spaces) would sometimes be cited by other FZL websites in their selections of “FZL pretty girls”, “FZL handsome boys”.

In this fashion, having appealing avatar pictures could make one becomes a celebrity not only in one FZL communities, but possibly the whole online FZL network. Thanks to the hyperlinks and key word searching, this will bring a lot of visitors in one’s online space, with the possibility of gaining a lot of new friends and even admirers. And as these “FZL portraits” are mostly modified by computer programs, one does not have to be very good looking to come up with nice avatar pictures, especially for the girls. “There are no ugly girls, only lazy girls.” And this is even

¹ Individual virtual spaces for the registered users of the website where the users can upload pictures, specify the profiles for their avatars in the website, write logs and interact with each other.

² www.yupsky.com

truer for the FZL girls with the specially designed digital picture editing programs like “Pretty Picture Show”. Smoother and whiter skin, bigger eyes, longer eyelashes, and make up, all these can easily be done just by clicking some buttons, and the beautification effect can be astonishing. As many beautification instruction articles have shown¹, even very ugly girls can look fabulous and become the “FZL masters” admired by many.



Photo 3 and 4: Picture of an ugly FZLer becomes beautiful by using the Photoshop software

This “fake beauty” construction and admiration activity of the FZL subculture surely is disturbing to the other netizens. There have been large numbers of articles appeared in most online forums revealing the “true looks” of “FZL beauties” by contrasting the

pictures of a FZL participant in offline life and its pretty avatars on the Internet. These articles became huge hits all over the Chinese cyberspace, and the responses from the netizens to this FZL “fake beauty” phenomenon have almost with no exception been critical and even loathing. The fact that the FZL subculture values the virtual beauty even knowing it is not “genuine” is beyond their understanding. As in the one most popular anti-FZL subculture video in the cyberspace, the virtual character “Dumb Daddy” challenges the admirers of the FZL fake beauties: “Don’t you know they are actually dinosaurs¹?!” However, for the FZL subculturalists, their identities and interactions stay in the cyberspace only, what the “reality” is in the offline life does not matter at all. Like the FZL girl with the alias “Kululu” says in a video published on the Internet in response to the criticisms: “...we just love virtual beauty...so what? And we will become the mainstream sooner or later.”

4.2. FZL “Mars language”, a non-mainstream Internet language

Although for the outsiders of the Chinese cyber culture “Mars language” is but part of the Internet language phenomena, the newly emerged “Mars language” used by the FZL subculturalists is actually distinct from the orthodox “Internet language” (*wangluo yuyan*).

There are various definitions of the Chinese “Internet language”. But generally speaking, in the broad sense, people consider Internet language as the “alternative” phrases and expressions appeared in the Internet age and have something to do with computer and the Internet. While in the narrow sense, it is argued to be the language used by the Chinese “netizens” (Jin, Qi, 2000). Of course, this strict definition of Internet language does not mean that any netizen can just come up with any word and expression and it would be considered Internet language. The implication here, as made clear by the entry of “Internet language” in *baike.baidu.com*, the biggest Chinese online encyclopedia compiled by Chinese netizens, is that the invention of a

¹ Internet slang, refers to ugly girls.

new Internet language word or expression have to go through a process of getting “agreed upon” (*yue ding su cheng*) by others. Therefore, to use Internet language is actually to follow the conventions, which can only be learned gradually through the interactions with other netizens. Because Internet language does not have a coherent word-building that can be learned once and for all. For instance, “ORZ” and “囧” are created as pictographic words which means “prostration” and “not knowing to laugh or cry” (for “ORZ”, “O” is the head, “R” is the chest with two arms pushing against the ground, and “Z” is the legs kneed on the ground; for “囧”, it looks like a face with a certain expression), while for “buy soy sauce” (*da jiangyou*) and “do push-up” (*zuo fuwocheng*), they are like idioms each has a story behind it. In a word, to be able to understand and to use Internet language is constantly to learn and practice how to be like the masses.

To learn and use “Mars language” is of a totally different logic. As discussed above, “Mars language”, just like its other name “mutant font” indicates, is more of a font than of a language. Its core is still daily used Chinese, and it is created basically by finding substitute symbols to replace the standard, simplified Chinese characters. These substitutes can be anything that can remind people of the original characters by their shapes. However, as there is not a clear “rule” to make these matches, a Chinese character can have none or multiple “mutant” counterparts, and a “mutant” symbol may be used as the substitute of multiple Chinese characters. In this sense, like some argues, people may not be able to read a single “mutant” character, but will be able to understand a sentence written in “mutant font”, as you can not be sure what a single symbol refers to, but will see what each symbol refers to when they are in a certain context. In this sense, being able to read “mutant font” requires basic Chinese literacy, some imagination in associating similar graphics, and not clinging to details. Extensive knowledge in Chinese language and too much attention on the particular would actually hamper one’s ability in reading things written in “mutant font”. Because a large amount of the characters used in “mutant font” are Chinese characters that are seldom used but still familiar to people with good knowledge in Chinese, and

this familiarity can easily become a barrier in associating these characters with the new meanings they are assigned based merely on their “looks”. While learning the logic of “Mars language” can be done at once. To use it allows creativity and imagination. As there can be multiple mutant correspondents of one character, therefore, finding new characters and symbols to replace the standard one can always be done through using different “Mars language” inputting and converting programs or the user’s own creation. Like in the following picture:

	識京尤媿喜懼駛莆吹☆鯨
我就是喜欢使用火星文	碣嘯4禧欢鉞礪欵★攵
	蛾嘯寔僖鸛駛礪吹鯉攵

On the left side is the sentence “I just like using Mars language”, while on the right side are its three different “Mars language” versions. There can still be much more different version of the same sentence, as long as the combination of characters and symbols can somehow make people relate it to the original standard sentence. Therefore, unlike using Internet language which is a process of conforming to the conventions and write like what other people do, using “Mars language” allows the youth to have certain degree of freedom in pursuing their uniqueness in the “looks” of their online writings while still having no problem in communicating with each other.

In the FZL writings, not only are the characters converted into “Mars language”, they are also arranged in ways that would “look” nice and different, thus makes spacing and typesetting of writings just as important as the looks of the words themselves. Typing in a lot of spaces before or in the middle of writing is the most common means, and meaningless symbols are also blended with the words, making unique arrangement. With this kind of writing, the content logic of the words and sentences become much less important as it is the “look” of the writings matter anyway. Large paragraph of FZL writing is very rare because that would be hard to be arranged

nicely. If the article has to be long, it would be arranged in the form of a long poem, with only short sentences on each line. Therefore, complicated or strict logic is also not welcome as it would be hard to understand when arranged in such way. While in using the Internet language, the content of writing is still a major criterion in judging the quality of one's writings and thus good Chinese literacy is valued, only a primary Chinese literacy is required in using "Mars language" and advanced education and knowledge would be unnecessary as it would not contribute to the good looks of the FZL writings.

点击	回复	标题	作者
1385	18	**、非主流吧° <<管理制度<<吧友举报申请<<管理组招募等√ [精品] [置顶]	傻宝123
1889	17	**、非主流吧° <<贴吧头条<<征集... [置顶]	傻宝123
530	96	【 照 片..】 骨子里的冷漠。	° 纠结
99528	9987	【 D1an店 】 ◆ 《 苏格'兰 》 情... [精品]	i qing· 结ご
13126	2067	【 ※ 便条店 】 向日葵的 想念\	阿阿阿阿\ 葵
3322	747	【 店 】 ::彼岸 一花开	恒√ 莱眠
26	4	【 唯有 纪念。 】 ##	颗粒花花ら

FZL writings:

words are loosely arranged and separated with Spaces and other symbols

5. CONCLUSION

Start with examining the relationship between FZL subculture and the Internet, the current research finds out that the Internet is the only social space where a FZL identity can be acquired, and to be a FZL subculturalist is to engage with the Internet and create an online FZL identity. As everyone has noticed, the Internet, the FZL subculture has prospered in Chinese cyberspace. They use chatting programs to communicate with each other, establish online forums and communities where they

can gather in groups, and runs individual online spaces as sites to express themselves.

However, the Internet is not just a medium for the FZL subculture, but also the virtual social spaces where the FZL scenes take place. To participate in the virtual FZL scenes surely entails going to the various FZL websites and interacting with FZL subculturalists. Nevertheless, the core of a FZL scene is that the people participate in it are with online identities that would be recognized as FZL. And the most important signifiers of an online FZL identity are “FZL portraits” and “Mars language”, both of which inherently digital, and can not be accessed in the offline life. Therefore, the virtual subcultural scenes are the only scenes for the FZL subculture, and a FZL identity is an online identity constructed using the two major FZL signifiers: “FZL portraits” as the avatar pictures, and “Mars language” as the online writing font.

Through an analysis of the styles presented in the “FZL portraits”, we can see that unlike what many people think, FZL subculture is not about one or certain dressing styles. The so called “FZL style” is a changing concept inclusive of all the fashionable styles Chinese youth may like, which, although sometimes may contradict with the mainstream, it does not have the signifying power like the subcultural styles perceived by Dick Hebdige had, which were intentional contradictions to the dominant culture and norms (Hebdige, 1979). What is non-normative about the “FZL portraits” is that they are used as avatars in ways that contradict the mainstream ways of avatar making in Chinese cyberspace. For most Chinese netizens, the usage of online avatars is not to showcase ones looks in real life, and unless the online identity is the virtual replica of the offline one, one’s personal photographs are seldom shown in the cyberspace. However, for the FZL subculturalists, personal portraits are one of the most important resources for the construction of online FZL identities, while the technical possibility provided by the Internet technologies to make one look “hyper-real” in the cyberspace is taken full advantage of. Beautifying one’s portrait pictures, uploading them as avatars to support the construction of a good looking FZL identity, and admiring the “fake beauties”, the making and using of avatars by the FZL subculturalists seriously

challenges the cyber mainstream norm about reality and virtuality.

Then by comparing the “Mars language” with the Chinese “Internet language”, the thesis argues that “Mars language” is not part of the Chinese “Internet language” in the strict sense. While to use Chinese Internet language well entails constant learning and conforming to writing norms and habits of the mass netizens, the FZL subculturalists refuse to do so, but come up with the “Mars language” which is to its core mutant fonts of standard Chinese language. The FZL way of writing is not just about using “Mars language”, but valuing the forms and looks of writing rather than the logic and content of writing. As Tim Jordan (1999) argues, the dominant language and the norms writing the language is the social structure in the cyberspace which is to the advantage of the native speakers, Although Internet language and “Mars language” are both after all Chinese, the prevalence of the Internet language is indeed to the advantage of the mainstream netizens who are mainly well-educated young adults. Therefore, by using the “Mars language” to write in a way that evaluates the forms and “looks” or words rather than the content and logic, the FZL youth are trying to convert the cyberspace hierarchy based on the using of Chinese Internet language that is to their disadvantage within the FZL online subcultural communities.

After carefully examining the two key representations of FZL subculture, the “FZL portraits” and the “Mars language” as the two major resources used in constructing the FZL online identities, it is revealed that they are totally different and even contradictory with the norms and values shared by the mainstream Chinese netizens. Therefore, it becomes clear that instead of resisting norms in the mainstream Chinese culture, it is more of the mainstream Chinese cyberculture that FZL subculture challenges. Instead of being a subcultural reaction to the adverse social structures in the offline society, the FZL subculture is more of a subcultural reaction to the social structures in the online society. Instead of being concerned about the development of the youth in the campus and at home, we should notice that there is also a life for them to live in the cyberspace.

REFERENCES

- Ai, Chujun (2009), “Qingshaonian zhong “feizhuliu” wenhua xianzhuang diaocha yanjiu: yi changsha diqu 1000 ming qingshaonian weili” (*Investigation of the Youth “non-mainstream” Culture: Taking 1000 Youths in Changsha as an Example*), *Zhongguo kejiào chuāngxīn dàokān* (China Education Innovation Herald), Vol. 11
- Bell, David (2001), *An Introduction to Cyberculture*, London: Routledge.
- Costa, Caspary and Wolfram Manzenreiter, (2003), “From Subculture to Cyber Subculture, the Japanese Noise Alliance and the Internet”, in *Japanese Cyberculture* edited by Nanette Gottlieb and Mark McLelland, @sia.com, pp.60-74
- Chen, Xiaoqin (2009), “‘Huoxingwen’, wangluo chuanbo de yizhong fuhà” (“*Mars Language*”, a Symbol of Internet Communication”), *Southeast Communication*, Vol.2, Vol.54 in total
- Dong, Changdi (2008), “Huoxingwen xianxiang pingxi” (*An Analysis of the “Mars Language” Phenomenon*), *Dangdai qingnian yanjiu* (Contemporary Young Research), Vol.2
- Hebdige, Dick (1979), *Subculture: the meaning of style*, Routledge, March 10, 1981
- Hodkinson, Paul (2002), “Communicating Goth: On-line Media”, in *The Subculture Readers*. Ken Gelder (ed.), 2nd edition, pp.564-574
- Jing, Song & Ke, Qi (2000), “Wangluo yuyan shi shenme yuyan” (*What Kind of Language is Internet Language*), *Yuyan jianshe* (Language Construction), Vol.11
- Jordan, Tim, (1999), *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet*, London , New York : Routledge
- Li, Jianwei, (2007), “Huoxingwen jiujiing zai shuo shenme” (*What Is Mars Language*

- Talking About*), *China Education Newspaper*, 4th, September, Page. 12
- Ma, Ping, (2008), “Qingshaonian wangluo feizhuliu wenhua qianxi” (*A Rough Analysis of the Youth Internet Non-mainstream Culture*), *Dongnan chuanbo* (Southeast Communication), Vol.12, Vol. 52 in total
- McArthur, J.A. (2009), “Digital Subculture, A Geek Meaning of Style”, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, Volume 33, No. 1, 58-70
- Sun, Qi, (2008), “Wei huoxingwen xungen” (*Finding the “Root” of Mars Language*), *Hulunbeier xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of Hulunbeier College), No.4, Vol.16, August
- Williams, J. Patrick, (2006) “Authentic Identities, Straight Edge Subculture, Music, and the Internet”, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol.35, No.2, pp.173-200
- Yang, Yong, (2008), “Wangluo feizhuliu yuyan ji qi chengyin fenxi” (*An Analysis of Internet Non-mainstream Language and Its Cause*), *Keji xinxi* (Science & Technology Information), Vol.24