

Chinese Youth and the Social Web: Identifying Patterns and Trends

by Samuel Jackson, Yale University

Prepared for danah boyd, Microsoft Research New England
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Background and Methodology

My name is Sam Jackson, and I am a current Yale College undergraduate (Class of 2011). From September to December 2009 I lived in Beijing while taking classes at Peking University, known colloquially as Beida (stemming from its full name, Beijing Daxue, or 北京大学). During this time, I had the opportunity to conduct formal interviews with Chinese students about their use of, and relationship to, the internet and its affiliated tools. In addition to this data set, there were countless other informal chances to learn about usage patterns and new trends and developments. What follows is a partial synthesis in prose of these findings, distilled as part of my broader effort, working with researcher danah boyd under the auspices of Microsoft Research New England, to further an understanding of current trends and developments in Chinese youth internet activities, especially in regard to social network sites and other communications media.

Before diving in to the interview material and explaining the many fascinating insights contained within, a little background about this effort. The fundamental question posed by this research is simple: *How can we understand youth practices in a Chinese context?* Answering this question is anything but. Several key research questions inform this survey:

- a) Where do students go online? What's cool, and what's not?
- b) Why do Chinese youth use the sites that they do?
- c) How (if it all) can different online communities be characterized?
- d) What are common usage practices, and how do they meaningfully differ from those in the United States?
- e) How do underlying factors in China – institutional and cultural – shape usage of social network sites and tools?

This report is not meant to comprehensively answer all of these questions, but is instead meant to provide an idea of the ways that China is the same or different from what might be expected, and how this can guide future research projects.

A final note and caveat on methodology before continuing: the basis for these findings is principally qualitative research conducted in interview format, corroborated by other firsthand

experiences in China. The sample taken for these interviews is very small (n=10) and these students are unusually unrepresentative of their larger peer-groups both at Beida and in China more broadly. While many opportunities existed (and were explored) in contacting and interviewing students, certain biases include both those whose discussions were explicitly recorded and annotated as well as those undertaken in a more informal manner. Some of these issues are detailed below:

- Considerably above-average English-language ability: This at once makes participation in these interviews possible, but also limits the ‘representative’ quality thereof. The further impact of this one factor are many, including:
 - Greater ability to use foreign websites which may not have Chinese versions.
 - Generally speaking, a much higher portion of these students’ social graphs exists outside of China as compared with students with diminished ability to communicate with non-Chinese speakers. These students are more motivated to form friendships with foreign students or individuals – the motivations may be causes of, or reasons for, English study, but either way it appears that more foreign attitudes are liable to be introduced to these students as a result.
- Peking University (hereafter PKU or Beida), one of China’s flagship schools, has a much higher profile than the average Chinese university, and as a result more opportunities exist for foreign travel and study, particularly for English speakers (see above). Some, though not all, students may have had the opportunity to travel abroad or to study abroad for a summer or other opportunities.
- Many of the students present for these interviews were selected as part of the Yale – Peking University Joint Program, a program which specifically selects, to some extent, for those students most accessible to or interested in foreign norms, ideas, cultures, etc.
- Students at Peking University are, on average, better-off financially than the average Chinese college student, and more likely to come from urban areas.
- Students are drawn particularly from Yuanpei college, a special program within Peking University which is a more traditional ‘liberal arts’ education in comparison to the more rigid disciplinary boundaries imposed by ordinary university regulations.

For a specific taste of the approaches taken, consider the following exhibit, an excerpted version of the worksheet used to direct the interviews:

- ❖ What social network sites do you use most often?
- ❖ Do you use any blogging or other content-creation web sites? If so, which?

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- ❖ Do you use your mobile phone to interact with these sites? If yes, how so? Why do you choose to use Xiaonoei (renren) / Kaixin001 / Sina / FaceKoo / QQ / 51.com / Beida BBS / etc?
- ❖ Are there differences in who uses which sites? What do you think? At what age did you first start to use different social network sites?
 - How and why did you first start an online profile?
- ❖ Who do you allow to access your online identity? (Friends, family, strangers?)
 - How do you manage access with the tools provided by these sites?
- ❖ Are social network sites safe?
- ❖ What do you think is appropriate to share online for everyone to see?
- ❖ What about for just your friends to see? Think about some of the top uses you have for these social network sites – why do you log on?
 - To share photos? To talk to boys / girls? Keep tabs on your friends? Meet *new* friends?
- ❖ What are the best uses for social network sites? Are you familiar with foreign sites like Facebook and Twitter? What about foreign brands like MySpace.cn?
 - If yes, what are your impressions of these sites? Do you ever use them? How did you first hear about them? What special steps do you take to access blocked sites? How do they compare with similar Chinese sites?
- ❖ How do you feel about online censorship regarding SNS?
 - Does this affect you or people that you know? How does it change your behavior online?

If you could change one thing about xyz SNS in China, what would it be?

Constructing a (rough) topology of online communities

For the unexposed reader, I believe it may be helpful to split the Chinese social web into three spheres: Communications, Social Network Sites, and Blogging. The segmentation here is necessarily imperfect, but reflects observations and commentary from my experiences interacting with students at Beida. Below, a brief description of each category and some of the most commonly mentioned sites within. In later reports, explained use differences and community comparisons between sites will be explored in greater detail; these are but rough outlines.

Communications:

This segment is taken to be communications sites or tools which offer principally chat type services. While in some cases this is not simply 1:1 – e.g., chat rooms, or multi-user

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conversations – the defining characteristic is that these tools are used primarily to chat or to communicate in chat-like manners; videochat is also a consideration.

Important mentions: QQ, Fetion, MSN, Skype

QQ: Tencent QQ, known generally as QQ, is a stalwart member of any discussion of China’s social web; it is a large and entrenched competitor in the instant messaging space particularly, but also extends a variety of other products on different technology platforms. QQ.com is an important web portal, and QQ also offers a variety of multiplayer games.

For my purposes henceforth, however, any reference to ‘QQ’ should be considered to refer to Tencent QQ’s instant messaging client, which I heard generally referred to simply as ‘QQ.’ If anyone ever thinks that Yahoo! (compared to say, Google) has too many ads or clutter on its homepage, simply take a visit to <http://www.qq.com/>; the same comparison can be made between AOL instant messenger and the very heavily monetized QQ messenger and its affiliated services.

My initial impressions of QQ’s userbase would be to posit that it is treated – among university / college age populations – in a relatively similar fashion to the great IM clients of yore, e.g. AIM or Yahoo! Messenger. This is to say, its usage may be declining over time to be increasingly being replaced by more mobile applications. I have little room to speculate on the uptake or use patterns of QQ with a broader population, but it is still very popular and – while in some places stigmatized as a legacy of middle or high school – often used.

One student, Liz*, had this to say:

“QQ is often used to chat online; QQ also has ways to find new friends. Xiaonei is used by young people but QQ is [used by] everyone... QQ is used for recreation purposes. We [used to] just want to use it to kill time. But now we have a lot to do, a lot of homework, so we don’t have as much time to just talk for entertainment.”

QQ was, for many students polled, their first foray into online socializing, and was one of the first introductions many had to the internet. In junior high onwards, students either discovered QQ on their own or were introduced to it by friends. Today QQ is still used – on both mobile phones and desktops – but faces increasing amounts of competition for attention from some of the options described below.

Fetion: Fetion is a relatively new phenomenon, but represents an important new trend. Fetion, a transliteration of “飞信” (“Fei1 xin4,” meaning “flying message”) is a product developed by China Mobile (中国移动). China Mobile is the largest mobile provider in

China, with a userbase of more than 500 million in a total market, at the time of this writing, of more than 700 million. Fetion is very popular among students, though for a long time I had no idea what anyone was talking about since its Chinese sound is not precisely mapped to its English spelling. Fetion is essentially an SMS-IM gateway client.

Why is this special? What it means is that students can be on their computer, chatting with a friend, and then seamlessly transition their discussion to SMS while on the go; it means that they can – for free, using Fetion – blast SMS updates about events and activities to all their friends. Text messaging costs in China are not exorbitant by western standards, but are non-zero, and the prospect of free texting is appealing to many. However, this entire suite of product and services is only available to China Mobile customers, interacting with other China Mobile customers. This covers a fairly large number of people – note above, 500+ million! – but is limiting at the same time.

Some students noted that they or their friends were pressured to use China Mobile because of these features, despite the fact that China Mobile – for the plans students tend to use – will have a higher overall cost of service. Fetion is an important part of understanding the ‘mobile web’ story in China today and represents an interesting look at what would happen if Google Voice and the e-mail-to-text gateways from service providers in the U.S. really tried to play nicely together. Fetion is, lastly, an important part of China Mobile’s very large effort at the mobile web, particularly targeted towards students, called M-Zone.

MSN: Microsoft’s MSN Messenger is typified by comments like this, from Sarah:

“I think that MSN is not very popular among the students, compared to QQ or Fetion. Few will use MSN, so that’s why it’s not popular. But my friends in foreign countries will use MSN.” MSN is typically used to keep in touch with friends abroad, and to socialize in non-Chinese contexts. Those who had more foreign friends were more likely to use MSN, and they were likely to use it almost exclusively to communicate with foreigners, given the much more compelling network efforts for their primary use cases of Fetion or QQ.

Skype: Skype is positioned similarly to MSN, with the caveat that it is more ‘useful’ because of its additional capabilities for telephony and because of its prevalence outside China as a video conferencing tool. Some students made special efforts to gain access to Skype (more later on why access is a problem) in order to stay in touch with friends and to participate in international organizations like AISEC or Model United Nations organizations.

Social Network Sites:

Social network sites (hereafter, SNSs) are the bread and butter of this investigation, and form the bulk of reported time engagement by those interviewed. In most cases, these sites are analogous

to anything familiar to U.S. researchers and readers; most discussion focuses on 人人 (*renren*, ‘everyone’) formerly 校内 (*xiaonei*, ‘campus’) which takes a preeminent role for students.

Important mentions: Kaixin001 (开心), Xiaonei / Renren (校内 / 人人), BBS

Kaixin001: Kaixin is located at Kaixin001.com because Kaixin.com was already owned when the site was started up with minimal funding; a funny story, related by way of Lee Kai-Fu, is that more established and deeper-pocketed Renren bought Kaixin.com from this third party after Kaixin began to take off and created a mini-Kaixin clone which in fact registered users for an alternate version of Renren. Names aside, Kaixin is an important property in the Chinese social web archipelago.

Students typically described it in two ways: first, as a venue for games, particularly social games; and secondly, as a place for older people. The typical divide was represented as parents spending time on Kaixin, students and younger people socializing instead on Renren. The eminently quotable Liz*, a junior from Sichuan, had this to say about Kaixin:

Liz*: My mother is friends with people there, other adults. They trade tips on how to plant vegetables.

[Interviewer: Like in a game? Like Farmville?]

Liz*: yes! They talk about skills, how to get more fruits, more vegetables. That kind of thing! We [students] don't use it that often, because we are very studious.

Many students reported still having Kaixin accounts, even if they were not the primary means of socialization; time was again cited as an issue, with Kaixin being seen as a place to 费事 (waste time) or at least pass it inefficiently playing games. Self-reflexively defensive about their status as elite students, PKU students assert that they are too busy studying to invest much time in such games. (It is true that they are very good and hardworking students, and that they do not have time to invest in such games... but that does not seem to stop many of them from doing so all the same. American university students no doubt sympathize, though it is to be noted that schoolwork obligations at Beida are often considerably more taxing in terms of raw time consumption.)

Renren: Renren is the current ‘big whale’ among students. It almost needs only a one line explanation: Chinese version of Facebook. This is how it was described to me by Chinese people, and it is the first impression one obtains when visiting Renren, which closely parallels the Facebook UI/UX. This being said, superficial appearances give way to some relevant differences underneath, though the average user is hard pressed to discover what these may be. Renren was formerly known as Xiaonei, but in conjunction with a Facebook-esque process of ‘broadening’ beyond campus networks, changed its name. It is often still referred to as Xiaonei, and a casual estimate would suggest that on the

campuses where it is most popular – and from whence it derives its name, meaning ‘campus,’ – Renren is called Xiaonei at least as commonly as it is its proper name.

While technologically / functionally very similar to Facebook, unique socialization patterns and activities do exist in China and even Facebook as layered over Chinese culture and internet norms might produce unusual results, were it available. (See below, ‘Facebook and foreign sites.’)

Liz* had the following to say when asked to typify Renren and distinguish it from other sites:

“I think that Xiaonei – now Renren – everybody may want to use it, not only the students, but I think that, why I use Xiaonei and not others, is that it is pure, and I don’t want others to search and find something about me and my information... so I just use this only. There are a lot of others like Xiaonei, just none that are stronger than it.”

In a world of (perceived) clones, Renren is first if not for features then for network size and mindshare. Its uses will be detailed in greater detail further on, and will be the subject of great focus and attention.

BBS: This case is a very fascinating surprise: At PKU, there is a site just referred to as “the BBS” which approximates an old-style Bulletin Board System; it is specific to PKU, but the concept is said to be replicated at least at certain other schools. The BBS is used for many campus events and notices, club meetings, and the like. It’s also used to air grievances and even offers some ability for semi-anonymity; while the administration / government certainly knows your user-ID, fellow students might not (though it’s possible they could make the link if they searched carefully by posts, since they can be linked to users’ previous posts even if not always signed). Still, this site is very important in campus life.

Discussions range from sending public birthday wishes, to complaining about the quality of dining hall food, to discussion of big events, e.g. why Obama did not come to PKU, but instead went to a different school in Shanghai when he visited China during the semester. The BBS is typically listed as first or at least among the top 3 most important ‘social sites’ for those polled.

Notes and caveats about foreign sites: This issue will be addressed at greater length elsewhere in the report, but suffice to say for now that foreign sites are rendered largely noncompetitive because of inconsistent access due to Great Firewall restrictions (e.g., Facebook) but also because of economic disincentives which are set up, as it costs more money to access foreign websites than it does to access domestic ones. Thus, while some students do have accounts on foreign sites, they are rarely able to access them, and when they do do so, it is usually just to maintain links with foreigners.

Blogging: Blogging is a prevalent activity, although many did not see it in that way. No one site distinguished itself so particularly for its blogging offerings in any unique way as to merit special mention, but the sites below were some of those mentioned in reference to different blogging activities. Blogs are often kept anonymously but are also posted to social network sites as notes / updates for friends; practices run a wide gamut, but follow Western trends in that blogging is seen ‘more and more’ as a very ‘time consuming’ activity being phased out for other mediums, such as Renren, in the eyes of many.

Important mentions: Sina (新浪) , Sohu (搜狐), MSN Spaces, Renren (人人, *See Renren*, under ‘Social Network Sites,’ above.), Baidu(百度)

Early Web Experiences and the Role of Parents

Background Considerations

A unifying theme in my surveys of Chinese students at Beida, formal and informal, was the understanding that for many shared patterns of behavior between US and Chinese teenagers, a given behavior was likely to have been begun earlier in the United States. This was a surprising experience for me, though not an altogether unpredictable one. While I can conceptualize of a time in which I did not use the internet, I cannot actually conceive of any life from middle school onwards without the internet; many students I spoke with had later exposure to the internet than their American counterparts.

To draw a personal comparison: there was a time when my main use for computers lay in Where in the World is Carmen San Diego? and related pursuits (age 6), but by the time our school librarian tried to explain the “web” by analogy to spiders in 5th grade, I was already familiar enough with the web to think her enunciation of “www” was ridiculous. My father, in the 1980s, worked for the first company to buy a domain name – Symbolics. In 1985, his *car* had dial-up. Our basement still contains 6 feet square of breadboard used to coordinate all our network switches and hardware. Next to a thick 100 year old cable in the basement ceiling -- our Victorian home’s early telephone line – there is another relic, this one in form of residual hookups from our early ISDN lines. I played NES before I could talk; we had a PowerBook back when they had three digit model numbers.

It is safe to say that we were the most wired on the block. These kinds of experiences are not representative for American college students today, but even when compared with the more typical course taken by many of my peers, technology and specifically internet use was more likely at an earlier age in our collective experience (with caveats).

Representing (limited) conclusions about this group from their responses, students reported varying access to *computers* at various ages, depending on socioeconomic conditions, but parents

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played an especially prominent role in controlling internet access once it became available. While desires to use the internet outside these conventions were *said* to be subsumed beneath a parent-originated drive for academic success, many students still said they took whatever measures necessary to gain what access they could around the restrictions imposed upon them.

A final note here: it cannot be emphasized enough the degree to which preparation for the “*gao kao*” (高考, ‘high test’), the principal test which sorts secondary school students, shapes the adolescent lives of students at Beida or other premier universities of China. A combination of intelligence, perseverance, and luck are necessary to pass through those rigors. Attention must also be made to the (historically) later uptake of internet access and computers in China, as compared to the United States. Thus, those disparities which do exist in behavioral timing may be expected to become even less pronounced in future university cohorts.

From Chatrooms to Social Networks: Formative Experiences Online

What follows are illustrative stories meant to evoke a general sense of the patterns noted above.

Liz* is a sophomore, age 19, from southwestern China – Sichuan. She is now majoring in business, and is very happy to share stories about her home province, the native land of pandas. In high school, she pursued chemistry very seriously, and won a prestigious national competition which granted her early entry to top schools of her choice and exemption from the pains of taking the *gao kao*. She turned down Qinghua, the traditional “MIT of China,” over Beida. While in high school she did chat, it was not until her senior year that she used social network sites: “*I wanted to know more about Beida and was invited to Xiaonei, so that’s when I joined.*” Asked to sum up why it took her so long to first really get online in a social way, Liz* responded by saying the following, which captured a common sentiment among students: “***Before [college] we didn’t have as much time to access the internet, we were always in the classroom studying for the exam.***”

Jennifer*, interviewed with Liz*, first used social network sites in the second semester of college, though she was online chatting with friends in high school. “I started my Xiaonei to get connected with some Hong Kong students. We wanted to have some delegates there in Hong Kong and wanted to post our ad at Hong Kong University.” Both Jennifer* and Liz* asserted that “most people start around freshman year, [as] their parents will not restrict them” from using such sites as they would have tried to do so when living at home.

Contradictorily, Liz* also finds that it was in her *pre-college* days that she was really able to ‘*fei shijian*,’ (费时间, waste time) online. Asked why she no longer used QQ much, she said:

“QQ is used for recreation purposes. We just wanted to use it to kill time. But now we have a lot to do, a lot of homework, so we don’t have as much time to just talk for entertainment. On Xiaonei you can get information to know what happened to

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[friends] and to show them what happened to you, so this is different and much more efficient than chatting on QQ.

I think that chatting is one kind of recreational thing, for me. We don't chat for a fixed purpose. Gossip maybe."

The idea that new sites and tools were used to spend 'social time online' more *efficiently* was also mentioned by other students in later interviews.

Amy*, another sophomore, is from Hunan province, and is a big fan of spicy food. She was the most excited and interested of any subject, and while conducting other interviews in a common space she regularly broke in to add her thoughts to the discussion; she studies law as an undergraduate. She is a counter-example to many of the initial pattern I described; very much so, in fact. Amy*'s family first got a computer – and the internet – in 2000. From the start, she was hooked. Her mom, under the pretense of "protecting her eyesight," instituted specific time limitations on Amy*'s time online:

"Yeah, my mom is really strictly concerned about how much time I spend in front of the computer. **She shouts at me and we very often quarrel when the time is ended, she gives me one hour to surf the internet** ... when it ends I don't want to leave the computer, it's very natural, and my mom is just dragging me out, **I'm very angry and we quarrel, very often – maybe every week!...!** I can't play games... they did it this way so I can't get addicted to any websites or anything like that."

While it may seem that such limited access to the internet would prevent a full engagement with the social web, this was far from the truth in Amy*'s case.

Though Amy*'s first experience with computers came later than e.g. my own, her first *operating system* predates mine – she first used DOS in early elementary school, the second and third grade. Her first time online was in the fourth grade, using QQ, when her parents bought a computer, which she used in chatrooms "*just talking to every stranger, if their name was interesting...*" She described her favorite thing as "*Pretending to be a teenager who is 20 years old or something... I'd change my name very often; I tended to have very poetic names. 'silent flower, flowers falling silently.'*"

Amy* first heard about QQ from parts unknown, but expressed the following sentiment, familiar to any college student today thinking back to their middle school days: "**it is weird that I [was] so eager to use internet, but it was because it had QQ.**"

"I want to try something new, internet is really new, it lets me make it possible to talk to people who may be very far [sic]. I just tried it for one or two years. QQ now is ... my QQ now is just my friends in reality. I always get bored otherwise, talking

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with strangers. Cheating... 'oh, I'm a boy...' I like to say, I'm a boy from Xinjiang, or pretend ... maybe when I was 12, I pretend to be 22, and just graduated and majored in physics. And the guys just ask me, you're a physics major, can you tell me the weight of the earth? But at that time, there is not a good search engine, so I couldn't find out..."

Note also that Amy* had the opportunity to come to Beida via an excellent boarding school which offered strong English programs and other opportunities in high school, exposing her to more of these kinds of opportunities.

Parents came up frequently when discussing early internet use, and not always in the sense that they were behind with the times. Amy*'s mother came up when I asked around Renren:

"Don't mention renren! She registered a renren **earlier** than me and urged me to join! I don't like Xiaonei and think that it sucks, I just had a Facebook in the first semester of university, and when I come back home my Mom was talking to me, why don't you have a Xiaonei? I already have one, I am adding your friends as my friends! And all my friends are texting me telling me that my mom is sending me friend requests! it is very embarrassing! So I tell my mom I will register an account, and tell my mom that she can use my account.

Parents, however, were rarely otherwise recounted as drivers of social network uptake.

James*, Amy*'s co-interviewee, when asked how he first started to use the internet, mentioned 5th Grade English in an un-remembered capacity. It was not until high school that he got online: *"After I enter high school, I start to play computer games, online, but until later I didn't use it for information... except for chatting with friends on QQ, in high school."*

"I think our life in primary school, in middle school, is controlled by our parents. My parents always think that the internet is not good for kids."

James* is from Xi'an, and could be reliably found in the boys' common room playing video games with his roommate, following a well-trod pattern among many of the male students.. (The two floors we lived in were gender-divided and while there was plenty of intermingling, convenience created a divide. The first floor common room thus became the domain of poker and computer games.) Games were a common pathway to the internet, and a very popular pastime which helpfully promoted cross-cultural bonding during the program when we got a group of the guys together for Starcraft.

For James*, early experiences on the web were mediated by parental warnings of internet perils. Unafraid to boldly chat today, Sam alluded to stories that others also described:

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"I always have questions whether it is safe to do something online, because I hear a lot of stories about that. Someone was cheated online, they were talking on QQ or something, and the guy asked a girl to meet, and she was raped and killed or something... **my problem is that, my parents they didn't want me to make a lot of connections on the internet when I was not too old.** I could listen and play games, but not do other things. Safer than chatting. I don't like to chat with strangers online."

These quotes allude to sentiments about safety and privacy, issues to be addressed elsewhere.

Laura* and **Alice*** both only received cell phones relatively recently: Laura* got hers at the start of high school, while Alice* didn't get a phone until after school. Laura*: "I seldom used it, only to contact my parents and friends – as friends we always spent a lot of time together in school, but now I use it more" because "we don't have class together, so I text them more to keep in touch."

Laura* is from northern China, and though Han Chinese, she looks the part of a 哈尔滨人 (Harbin native), taller than most other girls at Beida, and looking less malnourished. She is generally equipped with a perpetual cheerfulness which leaves her smiling, but later in the program experiences suggested that she harbored deep doubts and questions from her interactions with international students when confronted with challenges to China (Story to be detailed elsewhere). She dreams of becoming a Chinese wine dealer, since she believes there to be a certain market there.

Alice* is from Shandong province, where she attended a special high school which offered more opportunities for language study. She was perhaps the most foreign-interested student of all those I met where internet matters were concerned. With smart glasses and a big smile, Alice* is very excited to share her opinions. She has traveled to many foreign countries because of her involvement with Model United Nations organizations in high school and college – a common means of establishing foreign links, in this research. Alice* was downright brazen in her frustration with Chinese internet problems but especially resourceful in trying to find ways to overcome them.

Alice* started using QQ in junior high school but stopped when she got to college. However, she says:

"Not everybody stopped using them. Some of my friends might. More nerdy people use this. **All the cool people use MSN.** There are fewer foreign students who will use QQ... Some of my friends asked [foreign friends] if I used it, and I did not, so I made one so we could talk when they went back. One of my best friends is Thai [exchange student], and on our vacations that is the only way we can stay in touch."

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As a precursor or complement to early experiences interacting with strangers, several students had penpals. But in summarizing the consensus perspective, Amy* said the following: “I once had a penpal in junior high school, and we talked about really boring topics, and we kept this relation for two or three months.” Mirroring the use of certain tools (see Skype, MSN) penpals tended to be foreigners with whom contact was a culturally broadening or language skill based activity.

Abbreviated mention is made here further of the roles that parents play in life online.

“My Dad uses the internet a lot, because he is a scholar, but my mom knows internet almost zero, because she is always watching Korean soap operas.” – David*

David*'s situation is no different from many anywhere else in the world, with some parents having a greater understanding than the net than others. In some cases this translated into a very active involvement with teens – see above, Amy*'s mother and her path-setting use of social network sites. Generally speaking those interviewed suggested that an age divide separated social network use, with older users – including parents – more likely to use Kaixin001 than to use Xiaonei / Renren. Without addressing this matter at great length, what follows are additional pertinent stories explicating the terrain of parent-child interactions online in China for this group.

David*: “If my parents did sign up, I would let them be my friends, but I would not be as discretionary as I am now with what I say. I don't tell them there is one, because otherwise they would find out; it would be a terrible disaster! I am posting all things, both the good and the bad.”

Amy*: **“My mom has a blog! And her blog is more popular than mine,** and her blog is focused on me! sometimes I wrote something on my blog ... and she copies it onto her blog without permission, even though it is very private... she is very proud of me though. She talks about Yuanpei and Beida and how proud she is. **Her blog is very popular because it was recording my life in the 3rd year of high school, preparing for gao kao,** so a lot of parents share the experience of helping their child get through the time of helping their child prepare for college, and some high schools teachers also read the blog and share ideas and talk to each other. I think my mom is very popular.”

James*: **“So embarrassing to meet parents online!** Once I was using QQ online too late – at midnight – and he registered on QQ and could see me online, and that time he urged me to go to sleep early, it's too late, you can't use QQ anymore... I think my father's version is very advanced, he could still see me [even if I was hidden]! That was 2 years ago, freshman year. I think it is

so terrible to let me parents know what I am doing here! But they want to know, they are very curious, my father is very curious - **he will Baidu my name**, to see what happened.

Liz*: "I Just want to share things with friends - I don't want my mama to see all my private things! I am friends with my mom and she is friends with my friends! {What does she want to find out about?} **She wants to find out about boys!** She just wants to find out about my life here, I don't have as much means to keep in touch with her."

Where Chinese parents are able, their use of technology seems little different from that of many parents in the United States. Important details about how students manage their identities and navigate different online social boundaries will be explored further in another section, but this should add flavor to the question of how student use of technology and the internet runs up against parental interests and concerns.

Early experiences are difficult to generalize fully, but within this small cohort and my limited experience with those outside it, while internet use has become very widely realized today, many students had serious limitations in the past which restricted their access – either infrastructural or parental. Fundamentally, this section should hopefully demonstrate just how ‘normal’ Chinese students are regarding their early experiences with the internet, even if modulated by a year or two delay in adoption.

Perceptions of Safety and Attitudes Towards Privacy Online

Background Considerations

Safety and privacy are hotly discussed topics in China, just as they are in the United States. Certain subjects reported stories of parents warning them of the dangers of sharing their information publicly; others were encouraged by their parents to explore the vanguard of information-sharing online.

Maintaining identities and privacy boundaries online is often a challenge for youth in China using social networking sites (社区网站, shèqūwǎngzhàn) and other forms of social media (社会媒体, shèhuì méiti). Previous sections of this report have detailed the ways in which the social media landscape is generally familiar looking, with notably larger amounts of forum / BBS usage and interesting mobile applications compared with the United States. Further divergence might

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be expected at the level of particular usage practices, but these limited interviews are not sufficient to make such general conclusions. Instead, it is fair to say that considering personal attitudes towards privacy and safety online, there is great heterogeneity in responses: there exists a range from completely resigning from the fight for privacy online, to those who carefully moderated their online worlds in a conscious effort to maintain boundaries and identities online. Similarities certainly persisted.

Chinese students appear to mirror American ones in that they feel privacy and safety online are important, but are often not fully aware – or are consciously unsure – of how openly they may be sharing data and exposing personal information. At the same time, there is a strong general desire to manage online access and information. Social graph tailoring online is an interesting point of comparison given historical notions of unique Asian / Chinese social qualities, but any particular traits are not immediately clear from this sample.

These conflicting scenarios are illustrated particularly well by one incident which took place during the program: one female (PKU) student came to a sudden series of disagreements with her Yale roommate, originating from disputes pertaining to questions of American and Chinese competitiveness brought up by a guest speaker. (Specifically, the presentation of the idea that China was beholden to the U.S. By virtue of its economy and foreign exchange holdings). In a signal of passive-aggressive responses to come, it was discovered by other Yale exchange students that she had posted on her Xiaonei account profile page a notice critical of the program and the students in the program. Following this notice, a chorus of other Chinese students – *not* affiliated with the program – joined in chorus to register their discontent with foreign students generally, expressing displeasure at their lack of respect for Chinese society, etc.

What followed is as predictable as it was socially painful: an online argument ensued, with hurt Yale students commenting on Xiaonei disputing the accusations, defending themselves, and arguing with the unknown attackers. The student then amended her original statement to specify that it referred *only* to “one person in particular” (i.e., her roommate) and after further online drama, the entire dialogue was deleted.

A post-mortem effort to facilitate a rapprochement between the two brought interesting revelations, though no success at rehabilitating the former friendship: the PKU student said that her profile was “for friends only, someplace to post things just for them to see” even though she acknowledged that she had accepted friend requests from those outside that immediate circle; the fact that foreigners could be friends on Xiaonei, first, and furthermore, that they might understand Chinese, was a little accepted fact. The indignant response was based upon the fact that it was meant not so much as a specific attack but rather a general “venting.” Ultimately, for her, “love for China” came before friendship, and the perceived slights to the nation outweighed the value of the friendship.

Additional background note: from an IT perspective, students could be tracked online comprehensively through the use of a log-in system designed ostensibly to serve as an internet access control security system. Here, the same student ID # login is used for the Blackboard system, BBS, and also initial registration: Computers are tied to MAC addresses and only one computer can be in use by a particular user at any time to connect to the network. However, rather than allow hard linked pre-authentication of specified MAC addresses linked to a particular user ID, the user is required to log in almost every time to gain access to the network on a particular computer, and to ensure that it is they who is online at that time. Beida students have a particular piece of software that automates this process.

Sharing, Privacy, and Keeping Secrets Online

What follows are illustrative stories meant to demonstrate a variety of different perspectives. These privacy scenarios are divided in rough approximation from places of “least” public sharing to “most” or “least anonymous” instances of sharing online.

Anonymity Online

Alice*, from Shandong province, cares a lot about privacy online. She was one of the people who was most saddened by restricted access to foreign social media sites, for one reason in particular: Alice* used the different audiences of each side to maintain a rough firewall between different kinds of content that she liked to share, maintaining different kinds of identities in compliance with different norms. On her Facebook page, which was only accessible to her foreign friends, she could put up pictures of herself at parties and other events which, while par for the course for many U.S. college students, would have brought social reprisals from her peers in China.

“I kind of prefer having the censorship etc - so that I can use Facebook in different ways, and Xiaonei still keep the same way. I am quite satisfied with the current Xiaonei. I kind of don't want XN to become a Chinese version of Facebook. The people who use [Xiaonei], because they have a certain group of people who use it - Chinese people - and for Facebook it is foreigners. I kind of don't want all my Chinese friends to start to use Facebook, because then I would feel I have to stop using Facebook this way.

I think I am somehow more conservative because I worry about how people judge me - this conversation would never happen between me and some Chinese guy. I think most Chinese students are somehow very conservative and will judge you, but foreign students do not care if you drink and party and don't study as hard. The people who use FB have more overseas experience and are more open

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mindful. If you don't have more friends on FB, you don't want to use it, and if you have more friends, then you will want to use it."

Managing her Chinese-language activities online, Alice* followed the pattern of several other students (principally female in this sample) who talked about their writing of anonymous globs. Throughout, privacy concerns were highly salient for her:

Alice*: Yes, I worry about privacy, secrets, stuff like that. It might be dangerous. Don't you think it is weird that you know someone but they know you better than you know them? In real life you try to avoid that happening. I worry about crushes on boys getting out. In middle high I used to put that on, but now I don't. I use physical diary or anonymous blogs.

For her and other students, the use of anonymous blogs was less as private diary, and more to find a receptive audience outside their peer circles. The use of these anonymous blogs was not merely to vent into the ether but often developed specific return audiences who would offer advice, consolation, and a listening ear.

I have plenty of blogs - I kept changing them. When my friends find my blog I just change it. I want to hear what some people think about my emotional and - you know - stupid things you have done, I want to hear their perspectives, but not from your friends. If you said something really bad about someone, you cannot let everyone else know about it.

What kind of complaints does she post about? "If I stay up until 4 am, I will complain about not being able to sleep, or do work, [or] write curse words." More serious topics also come up.

Liz* uses her blog in a similar way, and it is likewise anonymous:

"When I am having a hard time I will go there to express my feelings. People will comment (but it is anonymous, they do not know who I am). It's nice to have them read my feelings, they can give me advice, but they don't have to know my troubles. They usually comfort me. I have a community of people who always read. Just several people who often access my website. I think they are from different parts of China. I think they know [I go to Beida], but they don't know who I am."

Generally speaking, Alice* was very wary about publicly sharing her blog, hence her frequent shifts whenever she was found out. While some came from a desire for privacy outside her friend circle, other anxieties came from worries about the job market (找工作).

"I know for some employers, they will try to search for your personal information, and if they find out your personal blog, **they will find out who you truly are...** this might not be very good for your career."

If you upload a lot of photos of you drinking and partying, then that would not be good.. **I do that, even if other people do not.** I am thinking of deleting all the pictures because it could be really bad. I think it would be very easy for [companies] to find out. Probably they would use another person's account to find out. An American professor told me about this, he said that this sometimes happened with American companies.

Aside from her prodigious blogging and social networking use, Alice* stayed quite up to date with the latest new developments, eager for new sites from the United States that might not be blocked that she could investigate. She was excited when I offered a Google Wave invite (though , like most others, unsure what to do with it). Come January 2010, with Google's announcement that it would withdraw from China, her profile pages were full of sad updates and worries about her future access to all of her favorite tools.

Also of mention is the ability to post anonymously on the school BBS. One subforum, called "secret garden" (so named for a traditional Chinese tale), allows users the chance to post semi-anonymously. However, their user ID #s are still visible, and identities can often be correlated by searching for other anonymous posts from that user over time or by identifying friends. Common uses for the anonymous portion of the BBS include complaints about the school cafeterias, or to express private feelings and opinions on matters from love to why Obama did not visit Beida during his visits to China.

Managing Online Friendships

The most common medium for socialization online appeared to be the use of social networking sites, and within that context access management is a topic of hot debate. Whether the matter of parents (see report #2) or peers, mediating online access and real world relations is no simpler in China than anywhere else. This is one realm in particular where quantitative differences based on cultural effects may be expected, but nothing which could be reliably shown from such a small sample as is had here. Still, heterogeneity of practices persisted, distinct from one another in ways which were often surprising.

The baseline makeup of friend relations online are predictable: primary, middle school, high school and college friends, with a bias towards high school and college friends given the timing circumstances in which so many students first became aware of these social networking sites.

Jennifer* has developed a specific system for adding new friends and accepting friend requests on Xiaonei, and her pattern is followed by many others:

"I first check if you are, generally, a good guy or a bad guy. Check if we have friends in common, find out how you got my information. After checking, if they look too much like adults -

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people with a job - [Liz* interjects to say, "we don't like adults!"] - if they don't have picture, I won't add them. If they are students my age, then I will add them. If they use cute pictures, but it's not them, I might add them, see what they do, and if they are not friendly, then take them off my list."

Jennifer* is describing here that if someone has a photo of say, a cartoon or anime or someone who is clearly not themselves, she may "test" them out. While that testing period may leave her vulnerable to someone finding out quite a lot about her from her online profile, it is still a much more cautious approach than that taken by some other students.

Jack* is an engineering student, which means that in some respects he is even busier than other Beida students (an impressive feat). However, when he is free, he is highly motivated to try to be social, and really seeks to engage the foreign students when he is not doing work, which is rare. His major is nanotechnology, and he hopes to use these skills to benefit the world through an environmental / tech company. He was interviewed alongside my roommate of 4 months, David*, and the two expressed a very laissez-faire attitude towards trying to contain their privacy online. Not quite "privacy is dead," but certainly farther along the spectrum from the realm of anonymous blogging and social networking site code-shifting mentioned above.

David* described the use of Xiaonei as "*To [share] the information you want other people to know,*" which is a simple but far-reaching definition. The key appeal, to him, is the ability to "***publish one time online, then everyone can see; it's less wasteful of time. When you write one thing you don't want to send it to a certain person, but just to talk to anyone, everyone.***" Rather than try to shoehorn SNS use patterns into real world ones of intimacy, it was taken for granted that more people would have access to information online, no matter the intentions. "**There is no privacy, but I don't care. I already rationally choose to upload. Before uploading, I make sure that whoever sees it, it doesn't matter.**

"I am just telling [all] my friends, not just a certain friend. All my friends in renren are my friends in the real world. Sometimes you face a dilemma, you don't want to tell all your friends, you just want to tell your intimate friends. So I don't write it. Then, you use MSN or Fetion to tell him or her, if it is something intimate."

For Jack*, there was a sense that privacy was an exercise in futility and besides, "*You don't know who will be interested in this feeling and who will be interested in that, if you just publish it online you will see who is interested; it is the easiest way to let people know what you are doing. It is no harm to let people know what you are doing.*" In contrast with the attitude of open sharing, more strongly put forward by the girls interviewed, both were hesitant to share more intimate thoughts online. "*I don't share too much of my thoughts online, only the things that don't really matter. Why not? I prefer to say to a specific person, rather than to just put it online. So I use email more, to write my penpals.*"

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Even so, despite the claim that everything is carefully considered and only rationally uploaded, David* in particular raised red flags at the prospect of being friends with his parents (See report #2), describing such a scenario as “a terrible disaster!” wherein he would be friends with his parents, but could not “be as discretionary as I am now with what I say” online.

Further Perceptions about Safety and Privacy Online

One problem that many westerners fear – being easily found-out online – is in some ways diminished for many Chinese-speakers because of a curious fact that there are so many fewer unique Chinese names. While “first names” are still very diverse, there is a quite limited pool from which most surnames are drawn. As a result it is common for many millions of people in China to all share exactly the same name, if it is particularly common, with the result that there are many more “John / Jane Smith” situations than would exist in the United States. Some students felt that this served to protect them [somewhat] from being found out online, a variant of “security through obscurity” or obfuscation, though they would admit upon discussion that additional terms – “Beida,” etc., – could narrow down searches and find them more easily if someone was specifically looking.

There is one feature of privacy online unique to Xiaonei which is particularly fascinating. Users of this social networking site have the ability to see their “most recent” visitors. This setting is not advanced-configurable, as is the comparable feature on LinkedIn which allows users to selectively control how descriptive a breadcrumb they leave behind after visiting a page. Instead, after visiting a friends page, they have full knowledge that you arrived there, and how often. Needless to say, for teenagers in high school and college, this is a much-used and much-discussed feature. Everyone likes to be on the “checking” end of this tool, and to know who is looking. I was curious to find out how people felt about their visits being tracked and visible to their friends or crushes, and got mixed responses.

Liz* says: People want you to know so you can visit the visitors' page again. I want to know who visits me but not have others know who visits me. If someone checks your page all the time, and you can see the last 9 positions, they will see who the others are. So there will be gossip... A friend has experience here. He is a boy, but a girl who is... her profile photo is of a blue sea, no other information. She always accesses his page every day, but he never knows who she is. He sends messages to her page but she never answers.

Others, however, simply pay no attention to it, even if they prefer not to be tracked. “Safety,” generally speaking, was discussed in a curious way; there was a lot of confusion and lack of trust that seemed to exist, with fears being widespread about Xiaonei after hearing about an investment from a Japanese company (Softbank) which some believed meant that Xiaonei had been purchased completely and would soon be selling all user personal information to the

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Japanese. Amidst these rumors, in 2009 the Chinese government made a renewed push of combination censorship / online reform designed to remove a variety of different sites from the Chinese web space, leading many to imagine that new laws and protections or restrictions may have been passed or created, but unsure about what form they may have taken.

Parents and media both play a role here, though no one recollects any brouhaha as momentous as the public campaigns against MySpace in the United States from a few years back. James* for example has heard many 'stories' but usually didn't know where any of them came from, aside from his parents or the occasional website rumor:

I always have questions whether it is safe to do something online, because I hear a lot of stories about that. Someone was cheated online, they were talking on QQ or something, and the guy asked a girl to meet, and she was raped and killed or something... so my problem is that, my parents they didn't want me to make a lot of connections on the internet when I was not too old. I could listen and play games, but not do other things. Safer than chatting. I don't like to chat with strangers online.

My fear comes from my mom. She tells me a lot of stories. There is a kid who talks to a stranger on the train, and the stranger knows the kids name and his family information, and then the stranger called to the kid's mother to say the kid has a problem somewhere so you should send me money... The bad stories often come from the news, but in real life, I never know anyone have something happen to them.

Amy* disagreed, but focused her concerns in another direction:

I think it is safe... I think I am just being like, I feel offended because there is a lot of porn websites that just pop up, pop out from the windows. I hate it!

Still, though fears of strangers led James* to play video games and a lack of it meant Amy* spent fifth grade chatting with strangers, sharing was still a universal norm, even if it varied in degree. Social effects broke down worries about actual dangers for James*: *“At first think that my information – my picture – can be seen for everyone. But after some time, [I saw that] if everyone can do it, it's not that dangerous, it's OK, so I just do it. Before college I worried a lot, but at college everyone shared personal information on Renren, so I don't worry.”*

Perceptions had as much to do with exposure to different norms or ideas about safety as they did with an actual analysis of the risks and threats involved. In discussions, those who feared movie-plot scenarios like kidnappings or identity theft recognized that the likelihood was probably less than expected, thanks to an availability bias; those who were more laissez-faire acknowledged that, their best efforts to the contrary, they might still have something to worry about.

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Conclusions

Chinese students face the same questions and struggles with privacy and safety online as do their American counterparts, and look to similar cues – media, parents, friends – for help navigating this landscape. This small scale analysis hints at behavioral patterns which may diverge – social graph maintenance schema, types of associations, etc – but the fundamental finding is that so much is familiar to visitors from abroad, even if wrapped in a layer of Chinese characters. Chinese sites like Xiaonei took their inspiration from Facebook for many features and, for some time, for literal design elements. As they have matured they continue to tackle their unique challenges in new and different ways, and in the future it may increasingly be the case that the Chinese sites have a lot worth copying for export stateside.

Currently, 'opening up' of Chinese social networks is occurring alongside increasing drives for more public user data defaults from Facebook and other firms. While adults are as unwelcome to Chinese students on Xiaonei as they were to American college students when Facebook opened, the seal is open and growth continues, even if age discrepancies continue to divide Kaixin001 and Renren. Students are adept at shifting between different mediums to manage their differing social interactions and levels of access, except, of course, when they're not, as in the initial story told at the start of this report.

Privacy, safety, and security online have another specter lurking that isn't of concern to American students: the government. Dealing with censorship and other barriers online are something which must be navigated concurrently with these social constraints, but it is a subject for later investigation.