Civic Engagement Among Older Chinese Internet Users

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This study examines older Chinese Internet users’ participation in voluntary associations, communities, and politics, focusing on members of a senior-oriented computer training organization based in Shanghai, China. The results show that the Internet can facilitate the civic engagement of these older Chinese, as illustrated by their active participation in Internet-promoting activities, devotion to starting new computer clubs in local communities, and efforts in persuading government officials to provide necessary resources for establishing and maintaining local computer clubs. The findings suggest the following: The Internet can be a useful concept (in contrast to its online informative and communicative functions per se) to facilitate civic engagement in the offline world, computer clubs might be a more attractive approach to civic engagement among older Chinese, and the Internet’s impact is mediated by the historical and political contexts of older Chinese. These findings call for a broader understanding of the impact of the Internet on civic engagement.

Keywords: information and communication technologies (ICTs); volunteering; activism

Civic engagement can be defined as citizens’ connection with and participation in voluntary associations, local communities, and political activities (Putnam, 2000). The primary goal of making such a connection and facilitating such participation is to “improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241). Currently, the impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs, including computers and the Internet) on the civic engagement of
older adults—especially those in non-Western settings—has been largely understudied. Yet those settings and age groups should not be overlooked because the impact of the Internet greatly depends on existing social and power structures and relations (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Holloway & Valentine, 2003; Jones, 1999; S. M. Wilson & Peterson, 2002) and individual motives, goals, lifestyles, and life stages (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Haythornthwaite, 2001). The findings generated from a particular age group in a particular setting cannot and should not be overgeneralized to other age groups in other settings (or other age groups in the same setting).

As one of the first attempts to generate new knowledge about the impact of new ICTs on individuals at later life stages and in non-Western settings, this study explores older Chinese Internet users’ civic engagement in the broader social context of contemporary China. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, semistructured, open-ended interviewing and a grounded theory approach were used to detect information that would be difficult to uncover in a quantitative study. One unexpected key point that emerged during this qualitative process was that new ICTs like computers and the Internet can facilitate civic engagement in the offline world, which was largely ignored in previous studies (and the initial interview guide for this study; see the “Interview Topics” section below) that focused primarily on the online aspect of the Internet’s impact. More precisely, although the literature has examined extensively the impact of new ICTs that have powerful informative and communicative functions in the online world, it has also largely ignored that these technologies can have broader impact that goes beyond the online world. As revealed in this study, new ICTs can enable new types of social organizations such as computer training organizations and self-organized computer clubs. In certain national and cultural contexts, these new types of social organizations may be better than conventional social organizations in facilitating civic engagement (in the physical world). This study thus calls for a broader understanding of the impact of the Internet on civic engagement.

Civic Engagement and Older Chinese

The general literature on civic engagement indicates that the level of civic engagement in China lags behind Western nations (Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001). There is also evidence that volunteering among older Chinese is much less common than among older Americans. For instance, a recent survey shows that fewer than 15% of older Chinese in Shanghai participate in volunteering activities (Shanghai Research Center on Aging, 2005),
whereas various surveys indicate that in the United States 24% to 40% of older Americans volunteer (Chambre, 1993; Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007; J. Wilson, 2000). A major contributor to the low rate of volunteering among older Chinese is that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) does not encourage and often even prohibits the formation and participation in many types of voluntary organizations (Chang, 2004; Ho, 2001). In particular, non-state-organized political and religious organizations that count for the majority of voluntary associations in Western democratic countries (Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001) are strictly controlled under the current Chinese regime (Brown, 2004; Goldman, 2005; Kolodner, 1994; Wright, 2001). There are not many organizations for Chinese people to join (Saich, 2000), even if they are willing to (take the risk to) participate in voluntary associations.

While still tightly controlling citizen-organized organizations, since the 1980s, the PRC government has slowly begun to reform the political system in China through state-initiated campaigns. For instance, since the 1990s, the PRC government has begun to experiment with community (shequ) reforms in large cities, including Shanghai, as a way to increase citizen participation. The key feature of the shequ experiment is to separate community organizations or shequs from the government, and to give shequs more autonomy so that they can better solve their own problems (Derleth & Koldyk, 2004). However, the reformed shequs so far have not been able to attract much participation from the residents—according to one study, fewer than 15% of the residents are actively engaged in shequ activities (Wang, 2002, cited in Derleth & Koldyk, 2004). An important reason for this low participation is that the shequ reform is (correctly) perceived by community members as a state project that obviously involves power and control (Derleth & Koldyk, 2004). Yet, for this generation of older Chinese, there is a special reason for not wanting to be involved in state-initiated political activities: the life lessons that they learned from the Cultural Revolution during their youth. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) dramatically changed the lives of millions of Chinese citizens (Zhou & Hou, 1999). One of the most important lessons that older Chinese have learned from the experience of the Cultural Revolution is to stay away from state-initiated political movements and activities as much as possible (Jiang & Ashley, 2000).

Yet, lessons learned from the past are not the only factors that affect the overall likelihood and extent of civic engagement. Research shows that volunteering—which is a central measure of civic engagement (Putnam, 2000)—is associated with good health, a condition that typically accompanies younger age, and free time, which is significantly enhanced through retirement
(Chambre, 1993; J. Wilson, 2000). These two enabling conditions—good health and free time—are more likely than before to be found among today’s older Chinese, who have increasingly been forced to take early retirement since the mid-1990s economic reform that targeted state-owned enterprises (Price & Fang, 2002). In consideration of these historical and contemporary factors, an important question is: If these Chinese retirees are not particularly eager to participate in state-initiated civic activities such as the shequ reform that directly and explicitly involves governmental control, would they be interested in other types of state-initiated civic activities that do not have such strong and obvious connections to power and politics? Or, would these older Chinese be interested in self-initiated civic activities? In other words, instead of a top-down approach, would a bottom-up approach to civic engagement be perceived as “safer”—and thus more attractive—to older Chinese? Answers to these questions will have important implications for the development of civil society in China.

Civic Engagement and the Internet

The impact of the Internet on civic engagement has been a major subject of recent research on new ICTs and society. Several well-publicized early studies caution that the Internet weakens social connections and decreases civic engagement (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie & Erbring, 2000; Putnam, 2000). However, a growing number of studies (e.g., Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Uslaner, 2004), including a follow-up study conducted by Kraut and associates (Kraut et al., 2002), appear to suggest the opposite (for reviews, see Bargh & McKenna, 2004; DiMaggio et al., 2001).

The majority of research on the Internet’s impact on civic engagement tends to focus on the online dimension of the Internet, including political discussions among individuals that take place via the Internet (Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Mack, 2004; Shah et al., 2005; Wilhelm, 1999, 2000), the informative and communicative functions of political Web sites (Davis, 1999; Gibson & Ward, 2000; Hale, Musso, & Weare, 1999), online communication between citizens and government (Bimber, 1999; Hale et al., 1999), and more recently, e-government (Ciborra, 2005; Davison, Wagner, & Ma, 2005; Kumar & Best, 2006; Zhang, 2002). Although these studies differ in their conclusions—some argue that the Internet would facilitate participation (e.g., Mack, 2004; Shah et al., 2005), whereas others insist on the opposite (e.g., Wilhelm, 2000)—there is one thing in common among them: They all focus on the online
world created by new ICTs. To say it slightly differently, the common goal of these investigators is to examine whether the informative and communicative potential of new ICTs could facilitate or impede online civic engagement. Issues related to how the Internet might affect citizens’ offline participation are generally overlooked.

Some attention has been paid to the interplay between the online and offline aspects of the Internet’s impact on civic engagement. Much of that research explores if and how the Internet can be employed to strengthen community networks and participation within existing offline (in contrast to newly developed online) communities (Hampton, 2003; Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001; Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2005; Tonn, Zambrano, & Moore, 2001). Another major strand of that research is to analyze the relationship between Internet use and (offline and online) participation in voluntary associations, communities, and politics. There is empirical evidence suggesting that Internet use is positively associated with civic engagement both online and offline (Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001; Weber, Loumakis, & Bergman, 2003; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001).

Some scholars expect that the Internet will undermine authoritarian regimes like China and promote citizen participation and democracy (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002; Taubman, 1998; Yang, 2003). Others, however, caution that the liberating potential of the Internet will be suppressed because the state uses the technology as an instrument of social control and surveillance (Fountain, 2001). Indeed, the primary objective of the Chinese government’s promotion of new ICTs has been to stimulate economic development and to improve administrative efficiency by enhancing the central government’s control over various levels of the bureaucracy (Tan, Mueller, & Foster, 1997; Zhang, 2002). Promoting democratic participation, the primary goal of e-government in Western countries, is not at all how the Chinese government intends to make use of the technology (for a meta-review of existing Chinese Internet studies, see Kluver & Chen, 2005). Nevertheless, the explosion of China’s Internet population is expected to have far-reaching impacts on China and other countries as well (Fallows, 2007).

By the end of June 2007, 1.6 million people, or 1% of the total Chinese Internet population, were older Chinese above age 60 (China Internet Network Information Center, 2007). Yet, with only a few exceptions (Xie, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b; Xie & Jaeger, 2008), very little is known about the characteristics and experiences of this group of Internet users. Specifically, at the intersection of new ICTs, older Chinese, and civic engagement, an important question is: Within the larger historical, political, and economic contexts of China, how do older Chinese Internet users participate in civic affairs? The following sections aim to provide some answers.
Method

Research Site

OldKids (lao xiaohai, a widely used Chinese phrase that refers to active seniors and can be literally translated as “old kids”) is a senior-oriented computer training organization headquartered in Shanghai, China. Since mid-2000, OldKids has trained more than 1,000 older Chinese to use computers and the Internet. In addition to the computer classes that typically last 4 to 8 weeks and are often taught by instructors similar to the students’ ages, OldKids also encourages and facilitates students from the same computer class to organize computer salons (diannao shalong)—which may last for years—so that they can continue meeting with and learning from their peers (for a detailed description of the history and development of the OldKids organization, see Xie, 2005).

Shanghai is the financial and economic center of and the largest city in China. By the end of 2004, it had a population of 13.5 million. Among those residents, 2.6 million (19.3%) were age 60 or older, and 2 million (14.9%) were age 65 or older. In 2003, the average monthly income of urban older Shanghai residents was RMB 1,014.9 (approximately $124) (Shanghai Research Center on Aging, 2005). As of the end of 2002, 12.6% of Shanghai residents had 4 or more years of college education (Shanghai Municipal Population and Family Planning Commission, 2003).

Participants

A total of 33 older Chinese Internet users who were members of the OldKids organization were interviewed. These participants ranged from 50 to 79 years in age (M = 62.5). Nineteen (57.6%) of them were female, and 14 (42.4%) were male. Twenty (60.6%) of the 33 participants were college educated, 5 (15.2%) high school educated, 4 (12.1%) technical secondary school educated, and 4 (12.1%) middle school educated, indicating that this sample of OldKids members has a significantly higher level of education than the average educational level of Shanghai residents.

All 33 OldKids members who participated in this study were retired, even though some of them were still in their early 50s. They all had relatively good pensions. Their average pension was about RMB 1,500 (approximately $183) per month, which was almost 50% higher than the average monthly income of urban older Shanghai residents. It is important to keep in mind that this sample of older Chinese was small and not a random one in that these older
Chinese were self-selected to participate in the OldKids organization, and were better educated and in better financial situations than the majority of their age peers in China. As a result, this population is not representative of the older Chinese population in general.

**Procedure**

Semistructured open-ended interviews were conducted in May and October of 2004. Interviewees were recruited using the snowball technique. Most interviews were conducted at the OldKids computer classrooms where the computer class and salon activities took place. A few were conducted at the participants' offices, private homes, or other locations of their choice (e.g., a nearby park). In several cases where the interviewees could not meet face-to-face, interviews were conducted via telephone, e-mail, or instant messaging (for a methodological discussion on the interview techniques used in this study, see Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Each interview lasted about an hour; face-to-face and telephone interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. An informed consent form (approved by the Institutional Review Board of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) was completed by each participant before each interview was conducted.

*Interview topics.* Based on the concepts and findings present in the literature, the initial interview guide, which was used to guide the first several interviews, asked questions about, for instance, if the participant had talked about politics-related subjects when interacting with others via the Internet, and if there was any online interaction between those older Chinese and government officials (e.g., via e-mail). The responses from the first several interviews with OldKids members revealed unexpected but intriguing results: On one hand, these older Chinese had been engaging in civic affairs in ways that their non-Internet-literate peers could not have done, suggesting that the Internet did have a positive impact on these older Chinese's civic engagement. On the other hand, however, these older Chinese's newly developed civic activities did not occur online. Nor were they enabled by the informative or communicative functions of the Internet per se (e.g., online civic discussion, or interacting with government officials, as one would expect based on the literature). Rather, these civic activities all occurred in the offline world (e.g., participation in offline voluntary organizations, local communities, and political activities) and were enabled by both the individual’s knowledge about the Internet and the Internet-oriented social organization (OldKids).
Upon detection and realization of the significance of this previously largely ignored aspect of the Internet’s impact on civic engagement, and in keeping with the grounded theory approach, new questions were added in later interviews to explicitly and systematically explore if and in what ways the Internet affects civic engagement in the offline world. Meanwhile, topics that did not appear to be salient were altered or dropped. For instance, questions regarding online political discussions among OldKids members were altered because the participants reported that they would not talk about politics-related subjects with one another, online or offline (however, further examination of their reasons for not talking about politics has revealed interesting results, which are reported in Xie & Jaeger, 2008). Questions regarding communicating with government officials online were eventually dropped, because it soon became clear that communication between OldKids members and government officials was primarily via face-to-face or telephone rather than online interactions. Following the principles of theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 201-215), the sampling process continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

Stages of Analysis

Data analysis for this study was guided by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), such that data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously to ensure the coevolution of data and theory. Specifically, immediately after each interview, the first step was to write a short descriptive and analytic summary to record general impressions of the interview process and the interviewee. Second, after each interview, audio data were transcribed into text as soon as possible. Third, once the interview was transcribed, the Chinese text interview data were translated into English and then coded on the computer using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas/Ti. Fourth, after coding, memos were written to record recurring themes or significant ideas that emerged during the coding process. After every four or five interviews had been conducted, transcribed, translated, coded, and memoed, all of the available materials were reviewed carefully, and based on the information they provided, new topic areas of investigation were added to the interview guide; some areas that did not seem to be salient were altered or dropped (see the “Interview Topics” section above). In this way, the researcher was able to detect, examine, and focus on emerging and important areas. Fifth, commonalities in the integrated themes and their categories were sought, and then explanations were formulated based on a
smaller number of higher level concepts (i.e., categories). Finally, after developing these explanations and refining the categories, the theory that could best interpret the data was written.

Findings

Overview of the Theory Derived From the Data

Data analysis indicates that there are important but previously understudied relationships among ICTs, social organizations, the contexts of individuals, and civic engagement. Specifically, ICTs require—and legitimate—the formation and development of new types of social organizations such as computer training organizations and self-organized computer clubs. In certain social, cultural, historical, and political contexts, these new social organizations can better promote civic engagement in the offline world than can conventional types of social organizations. In this sense, ICTs do have a positive, irreplaceable impact on civic engagement—although in ways that are different from those reported in the literature, which has predominantly focused on the online informative and communicative functions of ICTs.

The theory derived from the empirical data of this study is illustrated in Figure 1. The remainder of this article will explain in detail the emergence and development of the concepts and categories—and their relationships—that make up this theory.

Volunteering in Internet-Promoting Activities and Events

In the beginning, the OldKids computer classes were taught by an older employee of OldKids—Instructor Wu. It soon became clear that, because enrollment in computer classes increased so rapidly, Instructor Wu alone could not meet the needs. Therefore, the OldKids organization started recruiting “volunteer instructors” from its former students and, after giving them the necessary training, having those volunteer instructors teach basic (and in some cases, intermediate or even advanced) classes. The volunteers receive some monetary compensation (10 RMB or approximately 1.25 dollar per hour), which, in today’s Shanghai, to use one volunteer’s words, “is barely enough to pay for the volunteer instructor’s roundtrip transportation and a fast food meal after the class.” Although the monetary incentive is low, the participation is high. Many older Chinese have participated in the OldKids volunteer instructors group with great enthusiasm. Over the past 5
years, OldKids has been able to develop and maintain a relatively stable group of 30 to 40 volunteer instructors. By teaching computers and the Internet to their age peers, this group of volunteers has greatly facilitated the promotion of new ICTs among older Chinese.

The influence of OldKids volunteers has increased tremendously since 2003, when the volunteers were organized by OldKids to participate in two citywide Internet-promoting projects aiming at narrowing the digital divide in Shanghai: first, the “One Million Families Online Campaign” (OMFOC) that aimed at training one million Shanghai residents, especially women within the age range of 35 to 60 who were unemployed, laid off, or retired, to use computers and the Internet and second, the “Internet Surfing Project for Seniors” (ISPS) that aimed at training 100,000 older Shanghai residents aged 60 and older to learn and use new ICTs. Both the OMFOC and ISPS relied heavily on volunteers who had the time, patience, and necessary computer skills to help those who had no prior computer experience learn

Figure 1
Information and Communication Technologies, Social Organizations, Contexts, and Civic Engagement
the technology. Not surprisingly, many volunteers were older adults who were former students of the OldKids computer classes and current members of the OldKids computer salons. Since 2003, hundreds of OldKids members have participated in the two citywide Internet-promoting events as teaching assistants (officially called “OldKids volunteers”) of the OMFOC or ISPS computer training classes.

For many OldKids members, the main reason for volunteering is clearly (and consciously) geared toward helping others, especially those whose financial situations and quality of life are not as good as those of OldKids members. As one OldKids salon leader says,

Members of my computer salon regularly participate in volunteer activities. I know many members of other OldKids salons do that too. . . . There are many seniors whose situations are as good as ours and their retirement lives are not easy. . . . We want to help them. We want to do our best to help them throw off their housework and enjoy the Internet as much as we do, and to live happy later lives like us!

OldKids volunteers’ active participation in the OldKids- and government-organized Internet-promoting events and activities indicates that Internet use does not make those older Chinese withdraw from society. Rather, the Internet—more precisely, knowledge of and skills in using the Internet—has provided a new way for them to devote their time and energy to helping others by volunteering in Internet-promoting activities and events that take place in the offline world.

Organizing computer salons in local communities. In the early days, all OldKids computer salons were encouraged and facilitated by the OldKids organization to be formed among current or former students of a specific OldKids computer class, and all salon meetings used to take place once per week at the same location where the OldKids computer classes were held. As a result, the impact of both the OldKids organization and the Internet was relatively centralized to one particular location and limited to a small group of older Chinese. This situation is changing because more and more OldKids members are voluntarily creating new computer salons in their local communities.

Among OldKids members who have started organizing computer salons in their local communities, there is one thing in common: a strong desire to bring the technology to local communities and to share with other older adults. For instance, one computer salon leader, who has started a computer club in a residential area, says,
I bought a computer and got online in 1999. I have really enjoyed using the Internet to communicate with my friends and family and to find useful information. In 2001, I started a computer club in the residential community where I lived, because I felt that I had already played with and enjoyed the Internet so much, and that I ought to help other seniors use and enjoy the technology as well.

The leader of another OldKids computer salon also states,

I really feel that, since I have had so much fun with computers and the Internet, it is time to do something to help other older people in my community to enjoy computer technology as well.

These older Chinese enthusiastically contribute to local communities by building new computer clubs in their local communities; and the response that they have received from other older adults in their communities has been positive and encouraging. For instance, over the past 2 years, one computer salon now has more than 200 members, and at least 40 of them go to the weekly salon meetings regularly. In another case, the computer club was so popular that it had to break into two groups so that each group could have a manageable number of members. One computer salon leader’s experience is: “Some seniors at first were not very interested in participating. But once they get organized, they are even more enthusiastic than me!”

In short, after experiencing the benefits of the Internet, some older Chinese Internet users have voluntarily started devoting time and energy to organizing computer clubs in their local communities, whereas other older adults have shown great enthusiasm for participating in the newly developed local computer clubs. These older Chinese Internet users’ experiences again suggest that Internet use does not isolate older Chinese. On the contrary, learning and using the Internet has facilitated older Chinese’s commitment and contribution to their local communities.

**Negotiating With Government Officials**

Starting a new computer salon in a local community is far from easy because it requires not only enthusiastic volunteers but also a physical location with computer equipment and Internet access. However, by volunteering in the citywide OMFOC and ISPS, OldKids members have not only helped the promotion of new ICTs among disadvantaged social groups in Shanghai but have
also made positive connections with government officials—and they have been using these connections, or social capital (Putnam, 2000)—to negotiate and acquire the necessary resources to build and maintain their own computer salons. For instance, one member of an OldKids computer salon recalls,

Last year, the Shanghai government initiated the Helping Seniors Online project. Because we [OldKids members] already had some basic understanding of computers, we participated in that campaign as volunteer instructors. By doing that, we made the administrators feel that we still had potential. Afterwards, we told them, if you acknowledge our contributions and potential, then please give us a place where we can keep learning and improve our computer skills so that next time when you need us, we will be able to help you more. Little by little, we have been able to convince them more and more. Eventually, they started giving us support.

This salon is not the only case in which older Chinese Internet users have successfully persuaded the government to provide support for computer-related activities for older Chinese. Other OldKids computer salons also have had similar experiences. For instance, the founder of another OldKids computer salon, who has convinced local government officials to provide support for the initiation of this salon, explains how he and his salon members have been planning to take a new opportunity to lobby for further support from the government:

The third annual Shanghai Seniors’ Arts Festival will take place in July. One part of this festival will be an online Chinese chess competition. The director of our subdistrict seniors council wants me to organize seniors in our subdistrict to participate in this competition. We, on the other hand, have been trying to use this opportunity to persuade the director to give us more support so that our computer salon can grow faster.

These examples suggest that the Internet has provided a new way for older Chinese to interact and negotiate with government officials and lobby for support to accomplish a collective action. Importantly, these activities did not take place online or through computer-mediated communication. Rather, they took place primarily face-to-face and via telephone. Thus, the Internet is used by OldKids members as a means—in the physical world—to develop social capital and to deliberate and achieve their own agenda. These actions, as commonly understood in the Western literature, are clearly forms of civic engagement.
Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence that the Internet can facilitate older Chinese’s civic engagement, as illustrated by (a) OldKids members’ active participation and volunteering in the OldKids- and government-organized Internet-promoting activities and events, (b) their devotion to voluntarily starting and managing computer salons in local communities, and (c) their efforts in negotiating with and lobbying for local government officials to provide necessary resources for the achievement of their collective goal—that is, the establishment and maintenance of local computer salons. By engaging in these activities, these older Chinese have contributed to the dramatic growth of Internet adoption in China, which may lead to better online information sharing and interaction that is likely to have broad impacts (Fallows, 2007).

Importantly, the unique aspect of these findings is that the forms of civic engagement as demonstrated by this group of older Chinese Internet users are different from those reported in the literature. In particular, when exploring the relationship between the Internet and community involvement, previous researchers tend to focus either on interactions that take place within online communities (e.g., Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Shah et al., 2005; Wilhelm, 1999, 2000) or on how the online informative and communicative functions of the Internet may help residents of an offline community to be informed about and involved in their (offline) community (e.g., Hampton, 2003; Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001; Tonn et al., 2001). This study also shows that the Internet facilitates older Chinese’s involvement in their local communities—but not through the use of the Internet’s online informative and communicative functions per se. Rather, older Chinese participate in their communities by introducing the concept of the Internet into the community. In other words, in this case, the Internet facilitates older Chinese’s community involvement not because it helps to keep the residents informed about local news/events or to engage in online deliberative discussions about how to improve the community. Rather, the Internet in this case facilitates older Chinese’s community involvement only because it serves as an attractive concept that draws older residents’ attention and helps them to get together and become organized. OldKids members’ use of the Internet in this way brings actual changes in the community and therefore, as defined by Rothenbuhler (1991), is a new form of community involvement.

Previous research on the Internet’s impact on political participation primarily focused on e-government or how the Internet can facilitate information distribution and communication between citizens and the government.
This researcher, however, has discovered a different way in which the Internet facilitates political participation: that is, interacting with and persuading local government officials (which usually takes place face-to-face as well as over the telephone, because although OldKids members have already adopted the Internet, the local government officials that they need to talk to usually have not become familiar with the technology) by using the concept of the Internet, instead of the online informative and communicative functions of the Internet per se. This study provides evidence that, although the Chinese government has been promoting e-government since the late 1990s (Zhang, 2002), offline approaches like face-to-face and telephone interactions are still the primary ways local government officials can be reached. However, the promotion of the Internet by the government does create a positive environment that allows and even encourages citizens to walk into a government official’s office and ask for the resources necessary for supporting their own initiative—the computer club. Recall that the Chinese government’s primary motivations for promoting new ICTs are to stimulate economic development and political control rather than democratic participation (Tan et al., 1997; Zhang, 2002); this positive environment that facilitates older Chinese’s civic engagement is most likely an unintended consequence from the point of view of the Chinese government.

Most large-scale surveys (as reviewed in Weber et al., 2003; Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001) that examined an important aspect of civic engagement—membership in voluntary associations—have not explicitly listed “computer clubs” as a separate category of voluntary associations (the only known exception is the 1998 National Geographic Society online survey; see Weber et al., 2003; Wellman et al., 2001). As a result, civic engagement in computer clubs was overlooked in those surveys, which might not have been a big problem several decades ago, when computer clubs were rare. However, with the widespread use of computers in contemporary society, it is necessary and important that computer clubs be included in the measures of civic engagement.

This argument is supported by some scholars’ suggestion that, although Americans’ membership in conventional voluntary associations has dropped significantly during the past three or four decades (Putnam, 2000), new ICTs may have created new forms of communication and organization that lead to increased civic engagement (Lin, 2001; Wellman, 1999, 2001). The findings of this study suggest that computer clubs should be viewed as one such new form of voluntary organization. The World Values Survey provides a good example of how categories of voluntary associations should be subject to
change to be consistent with the broader societal changes. The 1981 survey measured ten categories of voluntary association such as unions and political, religious, and professional associations. The 1991 World Values Survey added six new categories, including environmental, women’s, peace, and development associations, to better detect new forms of civic engagement (Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001). Similarly, new ICTs create new types of organizations (e.g., computer clubs) that should also be acknowledged and incorporated into the categorization of voluntary associations.

The significance of the findings of this study cannot be fully understood and appreciated unless the unique historical and political contexts of the current generation of older Chinese are taken into consideration. For most of its history, the PRC government has generally discouraged and often even prohibited the formation of and participation in citizen-initiated voluntary associations (Brown, 2004; Chang, 2004; Goldman, 2005; Ho, 2001; Kolodner, 1994; Wright, 2001). However, this study shows that so far the government has allowed and (with persuasion) even supported the formation of and participation in computer clubs. Furthermore, although in general Chinese citizens’ participations in voluntary associations, communities, and politics are low (Derleth & Koldyk, 2004; Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001; Shanghai Research Center on Aging, 2005), the participants of this study have demonstrated great enthusiasm in participating in computer clubs. Counting the computer club as one (new) form of voluntary organization that facilitates civic engagement, therefore, is of particular importance in the Chinese context.

Also, despite the recent community and political reforms, participation in communities and political activities in China is still low compared with that in Western countries (e.g., Chambre, 1993; Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007; J. Wilson, 2000). It is therefore especially impressive that OldKids members are willing and able to actively engage in bringing actual changes to their local communities and to interact with and lobby for government officials to achieve their own goals. More importantly, older Chinese Internet users’ efforts in organizing computer salons in local communities embody a not-insignificant role change, that is, from volunteers who (relatively passively) participate in events initiated and organized by an organization or government to activists who voluntarily initiate local activities and, furthermore, reach out and push the government to provide the necessary resources to sustain and develop those local activities. This from-volunteer-to-activist transition is similar to that found in an American study, where volunteers had to take an activist approach to urge the government to provide resources to solve the problem (Chambre, 1991).

In the Chinese context, such a transition is especially deserving of special attention because during most of the history of the PRC, the word...
activists (jijifenzi) had always been associated with ordinary citizens being led, required, or even forced to participate in state-initiated political and social mobilizations (Farquhar & Zhang, 2005). Yet as reported above, building computer salons in local communities is essentially a citizen initiative, rather than one directed by the state or the Chinese Communist Party. Furthermore, in contrast to the Maoist era where activism was destructive to society, communities, and individuals’ lives (Farquhar & Zhang, 2005), the OldKids activism, although currently still on a much narrower scale, is constructive and conducive to the development of social capital and civil society. Could this from-volunteer-to-activist transition and the new activism demonstrated by OldKids members be the start of a larger trend of increased civic engagement among older Chinese and perhaps Chinese citizens in general?

This study generates empirical evidence that, under the right conditions, older Chinese are willing and able to overcome their fears toward politics developed in earlier life stages to engage in civic affairs and to make real differences in their communities. Yet, what constitutes the “right conditions” for promoting older Chinese’s active civic engagement? A quick comparison between the low-participation shequ reform and the enthusiasm in promoting computer use in communities as demonstrated in this study suggests two possible answers. First, older Chinese may prefer self-initiated activities to state initiatives; second, activities that are not directly related to power, control, and politics may be perceived by older Chinese as safer to engage with. Thus, to improve older Chinese’s civic engagement, it may be necessary to start with activities that are self-initiated and not obviously related to politics, such as the formation and maintenance of computer clubs.

The findings of this study have profound implications for understanding not only the situation in China or among older Chinese but also the global potential of new ICTs for promoting civic engagement. Building on and expanding the social capital literature, human-computer interaction scholar Paul Resnick (2001) suggests that “social capital is a residual or side effect of social interactions, and an enabler of future interactions,” and develops the concept of “sociotechnical capital” to draw attention to the combined power of social relations and ICTs in promoting social interactions. Although Resnick’s discussion of sociotechnical capital focuses only on the online aspect of the potential of ICTs, his definition of this concept—“productive combinations of social relations and information and communication technology”—in itself does not exclude in any way the offline potential of ICTs in promoting social interactions. In fact, the sociotechnical capital concept can be easily applied to this study: Social interactions in
the offline computer club facilitate the formation and development of sociotechnical capital both among OldKids members and between OldKids members and local government officials. This form of capital in turn enables further offline interactions that lead to volunteering, collective action, deliberation, negotiation, and the achievement of shared goals among these older Chinese. Incorporating the offline potential of ICTs into the sociotechnical capital discussion can lead to better designed technology and, on a more general level, can broaden our thinking about the relationships among technology, community, and individuals.

**Future Directions**

For practical reasons, this study concentrated on a small group of older Chinese Internet users’ Internet-related involvement in organizations, communities, and politics. As such, the focus of this study was limited to users of the Internet; older Chinese living in Shanghai, the largest city of China; and organizational, community, and political involvement that are directly related to the Internet. Future research needs to pay attention to non-Internet users, older Chinese living in less developed areas of China (e.g., medium- or small-size cities and rural areas), and organizational, community, and political involvement that are not directly related to the Internet. The comparison between the findings of this study and those of future research along these lines will provide a better understanding of the Internet’s impact on older adults’ civic engagement in the Chinese context.

Because the sample of this study was small and nonrandom, the results should not be generalized without caution. In particular, participants of this study were better educated and in better financial situations than most of their age peers in China; both factors, as has been well documented in the literature, put them in a better position than most of their Chinese age peers to adopt new technologies (DiMaggio et al., 2001) and to be civically engaged (J. Wilson, 2000). To test the generalizability of the findings of this study, future research will be necessary to examine in larger and more representative samples how these variables mediate the impact of the Internet. To provide a cross-national, comparative perspective, these representative samples should be drawn not only from the Chinese population but from populations in other countries as well.

The findings of this study also call for longitudinal research: It is possible that the observed phenomena are due to the relatively early stage of Internet adoption in China, especially among the older Chinese participants, who are not representative of the older Chinese population in general. At present, the
Internet is used by these older Chinese Internet users primarily as an attractive concept that helps them to participate in organizations and communities, and to draw the attention of and get support from government officials. Although such use of the Internet is made possible mainly because of the powerful informative and communicative abilities of the technology, it is not the latter per se that has contributed to these older Chinese’s civic engagement as found in this study. In the foreseeable future, will these older Chinese make use of the full potential of the Internet to engage in organizations, communities, and politics, online and offline? On the other hand, will the introduction of the Internet to other socioeconomic groups (e.g., rural, lower income, more advanced ages, with less formal education, disabled) yield findings that are similar to or different from the findings of this study? If so, what will it mean to Chinese society and the Chinese political system?

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