Chapter 11

Perceiving an Internet Community as a “Utopia”

Beliefs, Norms, and Resistance among Older Chinese

Bo Xie

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Abstract

This chapter reports on some of the key findings from a larger study, focusing specifically on how participation in a senior-oriented Internet community affects many older Chinese persons’ beliefs and norms...
in contemporary China. Semistructured, open-ended interviews and participant observation were conducted during 2004–2005. A total of forty-five participants, including thirty-three older Chinese Internet users (age range: 50–79, \( M = 62.5 \)), were interviewed. Data analysis was guided by grounded theory. A novel finding reported in this chapter is that the Internet community is perceived by the majority of older Chinese participants as a “Utopia” where they can preserve beliefs and norms that are no longer valued or appreciated in the market-driven economy in contemporary China. Such a perception reveals these older Chinese persons’ subtle but significant resistance to the beliefs and norms introduced into China since the economic and social reforms begun in the early 1980s.

11.1 Introduction

During the past decade, there has been tremendous growth in Internet adoption in China. In October 1997, there were only 620,000 Internet users in China (China Internet Network Information Center 1997). Yet, by the end of June 2008, 253 million Chinese people had already gone online (China Internet Network Information Center 2008). The dramatic growth of the Internet in China is coincident with the aging of the Chinese population. Data from the last Chinese census indicate that in November 2000, 6.96 percent of the Chinese population (88.11 million) was aged sixty-five or older (National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China 2001). In 2007, approximately 7.9 percent of the Chinese population (104 million) was aged sixty-five or older (Central Intelligence Agency 2007). It is projected that in 2030, 16.57 percent, or 243 million Chinese, will be aged sixty-five or older (National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China 2001).

At the intersection of the Internet trend and the aging trend in China is the constantly growing subpopulation of older Chinese Internet users. Although the percentage of older Chinese Internet users (age fifty and above) has been consistently lower than 5 percent of the total Chinese Internet population, because the sheer size of the total Chinese Internet population has increased so much, the sheer size of the older Chinese Internet user subpopulation has also increased significantly. In June 1998, there were only 14,400 older Chinese Internet users (China Internet Network Information Center 1997); yet, by the end of June 2008, almost 10 million older Chinese were already surfing the Internet (China Internet Network Information Center 2008).

Both the Internet trend and the aging trend in China have far-reaching implications for Chinese society and Chinese people’s everyday lives. Yet, to date very little attention has been paid to the intersection of these two trends. As one of the first attempts to look into this intersection, I conducted a study to examine the
impact of the Internet on older Chinese persons’ civic engagement, social relationships, and psychological well-being, and compared the findings with those from an examination of the Internet’s impact on older American Internet users (Xie 2006a). Although this study covered a broad range of aspects and many key findings have been reported elsewhere (Xie 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Xie and Jaeger 2008), in this chapter I focus specifically on one key aspect of this study that has not been reported previously: how participation in a senior-oriented Internet community affects many older Chinese persons’ beliefs and norms in contemporary China. Below I first lay out the Chinese historical, political, and economic contexts that affect Chinese people’s aging experience. I then report the research site, participants, and research methods of this study. Next, I discuss one of the key findings of the study: The Internet community is a “Utopia” that helps older Chinese to preserve their beliefs and norms. Finally, I look into the ironies behind this utopian perception and explore the implications for Chinese society and the lives of older Chinese.

11.2 Aging in the Chinese Context

Compared with the aging populations in industrialized nations, the aging Chinese population has several unique characteristics: (1) the absolute number of older Chinese people is very large; (2) the growth of the older Chinese population is rapid; (3) unlike most aging societies, China has an underdeveloped economy; (4) population aging in China shows tremendous regional differences: The proportion of the older Chinese population in the more developed coastal regions is greater than that in the inland regions; and (5) the growth of the oldest-old subpopulation (people aged eighty and above) is notable, with a growth rate of 5.4 percent per year. This subpopulation had increased from 8 million in 1990 to 11 million in 2000 and is projected to reach 27.8 million in 2020 (Lee 2004).

A widely circulated view argues that in traditional countries such as China, seniors receive more respect and have higher social status than their age peers in industrialized societies (Palmore and Maeda 1985; Palmore and Manton 1974; Cowgill and Holmes 1972; Simons 1945). For instance, Streib (1987) argues that American society, with its emphasis on self-reliance, independence, free choice, and self-determination, is advantageous for active older adults who are in good health and their especially financial situations, whereas Chinese society, mainly due to its norms of reciprocity and orientation of the family, is advantageous for frail older adults.

This view has increasingly been challenged because, during the past several decades, the forces of industrialization, capitalization, and globalization have resulted in dramatic social changes in China (Perry and Selden 2003; Price and Fang 2002; Bian 2002; Whyte et al. 1977; Walder 1989; Ikels 1996; Lee 1998; Tang and Parish 2000; Warner 2001; Zhou and Hou 1999; Zhou et al. 1997). As a result, the distinctions between Chinese and industrialized societies may be
blurring. There is empirical evidence that in contemporary Chinese society, filial piety may be changing, perhaps even eroding (Ng et al. 2002; Liu 1994; Joseph and Phillips 1999). Due to the continued demographic transition and dramatic social and economic transformations (e.g., the decline in both fertility and mortality rates, the one-child policy, and economic reform), the traditional family support system in China is experiencing great challenges in maintaining its capacity to provide support for older adults (Sun 2002; Tu et al. 1989).

Research suggests that older Chinese persons’ living conditions, health, and financial situations largely lag behind those of their age peers in the West (Chappell 2003; Li and Tracy 1999). Public systems of direct relevance to the older Chinese population, including the public health and welfare systems, have gone through dramatic changes in recent years. Yet, they are still underdeveloped and insufficient in meeting the challenges of the aging Chinese population (Chau and Yu 2001; Lee 2004; Lee 2001). Recent reforms in the economic arena also have had a significant impact on the lives of older Chinese people. In particular, the conversion of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) into shareholding corporations, coupled with the Chinese SOE managers’ failure to adapt to market-oriented practices, has caused great financial losses to the newly converted corporations (Freund 2001). This has often inevitably resulted in the laying off or forced early retirement of workers of all ages but especially older workers. Price and Fang’s (2002) examination of the interplay between economic reforms, especially the downsizing of SOEs and globalization (e.g., China’s entrance into the World Trade Organization), and individual characteristics found that age and education were the most salient variables in determining the impact of economic reforms. Older workers with less education can be categorized as “the discouraged old,” who are most vulnerable to the negative consequences of economic reforms (Price and Fang 2002).

When it comes to education, a significant number of older Chinese people are at a disadvantaged position compared with their younger counterparts, largely due to the negative impact of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). During that decade, millions of Chinese youth were unable to pursue their education because school systems at all levels all over China were literally nonfunctioning. Further, between 1967 and 1978, millions of Chinese youth were “sent down” to rural areas. This experience has had lasting and powerful influences on the subsequent life courses and behavioral patterns of the send-down individuals, including significant delays in marriage and childbearing, less advantageous choices in the urban labor force when they returned to the cities, and disadvantaged economic well-being (Zhou and Hou 1999; Jiang and Ashley 2000).

Chen and Cheng (1999) argued that both the send-down policy that has had dramatic effects on the life course of the older Chinese generation and the subsequent economic reform policy that has been in place since the late 1970s has likely required individuals to adapt to completely different value systems, behavioral norms, and social skills. There is empirical evidence that supports this argument.
For instance, Lu and Alon (2004) reported findings of a large government survey project conducted in September 2000 in Shanghai. The participants of that survey study—the “white-collars”—featured what Lu and Alon (2004) termed “three high and one low”: high education (four years college education and above), high income (monthly income around RMB 3,000), high position, and low age (twenty to forty). The findings of that study indicated that, as compared with the older Chinese generation that grew up in the planned economic system who valued “security, the prospect of the work unit (which means stability) and social requirement” and “selfless contribution to society” (p. 78), young, educated, “white-collar” Chinese people who grew up after the economic reforms that started in 1978 instead valued self-realization or personal development and personal economic rewards.

11.3 The Present Study

During 2004–2005, I conducted an ethnographic study of older Chinese Internet users who were members of a senior-oriented computer training organization headquartered in Shanghai, China (Xie 2006a). 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 percent) were age sixty or older, and 2 million (14.9 percent) were age sixty-five or older (Shanghai Research Center on Aging 2005). The senior-oriented computer training organization that I studied is called Lao Xiao Hai, which is a widely used Chinese phrase that refers to active seniors (who are as energetic, enthusiastic, and curious as kids) and can be literally translated as “Old Kids.” In addition to providing face-to-face computer training, OldKids also maintains a Web-based, free, senior-oriented online community in which older Chinese people can interact with peers via interactive services such as online forums, text and voice chat, and instant messaging (Xie 2008b). A key feature of the OldKids community is that the majority of its members interact with peers both online and off-line in the “integrated OldKids Internet community” (Xie 2005, 2006a).

I conducted semistructured, open-ended interviews and participant observation at the OldKids headquarters, computer classes, computer interest groups (which members called Dian Nao Sha Long, or computer salons), and member-organized social gatherings. I interviewed thirty-three older Chinese people who were OldKids members, five OldKids executives and employees, five local government officials who were in charge of various levels of the Seniors Committees in Shanghai, and administrators of two senior-oriented nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The total number of Chinese interviewees was forty-five (Table 11.1).

The thirty-three older Chinese participants ranged from fifty to seventy-nine years in age (mean age = 62.5). Nineteen (57.6 percent) of these older Chinese participants were female, and fourteen (42.4 percent) were male. Twenty (60.6 percent) of these participants were college educated, five (15.2 percent) high school educated,
Table 11.1  Age, Gender, and Role/Position of All Chinese Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>OldKids Members</th>
<th>OldKids Executives/ Employees</th>
<th>Government Officials</th>
<th>Administrators of Senior-Oriented NGOs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>60–69</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70–79</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11.2  Educational Background of the Thirty-Three Older Chinese Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Technical Secondary School</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>60–69</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70–79</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

four (12.1 percent) technical secondary school educated, and four (12.1 percent) middle school educated (Table 11.2). Considering that only 12.6 percent of Shanghai residents had four or more years of college education (Shanghai Municipal Population and Family Planning Commission 2003), this sample of older Chinese participants notably had a higher level of education.

All thirty-three older Chinese participants were retired, even though some of them were still in their early fifties. They all had relatively good pensions. Their average monthly pension was about 1,500 RMB (approximately U.S. $183 at the time), which was almost twice as much as the minimum living standard set by the Shanghai government and almost 50 percent higher than the average monthly income of older Chinese people in the urban areas of Shanghai (Shanghai Research Center on Aging 2005). It is important to keep in mind that this sample of older
Chinese people was small and not a random one in that these older Chinese people were self-selected to participate in the OldKids organization (as well as this study), had more formal education, and were 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.

Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling technique. Most interviews were conducted at the OldKids computer classrooms where the computer class and salon activities take 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 participants 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 and 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 (in Chinese, approved by the Institutional Review Board of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) was completed by each participant before each interview was conducted. Major interview questions most relevant to the scope of this chapter included: What is your view of the Internet? And OldKids? Has using the Internet affected your life in any way? Has being a member of OldKids affected your life in any way?

Data analysis for this study was guided by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998), such that data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously to ensure that emerging theory was firmly grounded in data while data analysis was strictly guided by theory. Detailed descriptions of the data analysis for this study can be found in Xie (2008a, 2008b).

### 11.4 The OldKids Internet Community as a “Utopia”

A novel finding of this study is that many older Chinese Internet users who participated in this study view the OldKids Internet community as a Shi Wai Tao Yuan or Utopia that is free of the “pollution” of market systems. As the following quotations illustrate:

> Compared with the mundane world where everybody is insanely pursuing money and material pleasure, I think this [the OldKids community] is like a Shi Wai Tao Yuan. It seems that people here are less utilitarian. People like the three cofounders of OldKids, instructor Wu Xiaofan, and the volunteers, they do not ask for money. They do not do things only for money. So I feel this is like a Shi Wai Tao Yuan. To those of us who have lived through that time, this is quite consoling. We finally have a Pure Land. People here love to learn new things. They are well educated and have the spirit of volunteering and dedication. So I feel this is very inspiring. It eases our soul. [Ms. H]
Learning computers at OldKids and being a member of OldKids have significantly enriched my life. I am especially impressed by the three cofounders of OldKids, who have selflessly devoted themselves to this community. I am very happy when participating in OldKids activities. I used to have many negative opinions about Web sites because, for example, some young people are addicted to playing computer games, and some students would even miss their classes to go to an Internet Café to play computer games. Things like these have made me think that young people should not go to Internet Cafés. But our OldKids Web site is different. I feel that it is like an unpolluted place, like a *Shi Wai Tao Yuan*. I think that the marketing behaviors [in the mundane world] are too heavily money-driven. But here at OldKids, it’s all about dedication, about learning. I feel that I have learned a lot from here. [Ms. T]

Similarly, another member describes the OldKids online world as a world that has “true feelings” because, unlike the mundane world where everything is about money, people in the online world are selflessly dedicated to helping others without asking for money in return:

I think the OldKids online world is wonderful. Although the online world is virtual, there are true feelings in this world. In the mundane world, everything is about money. The real-life world is a monetary world. You can’t get anything done without money. However, in the online world, even though we may not know each other [in real-life], we all are selfless. Those who know more about computers teach others for free. I think this spirit is very valuable. For example, the first time when I visited OldKids’ online chat room, I had no idea how to use it. Someone from another city, whom I never met before, tried very hard to teach me step by step. I was really confused by those steps, but s/he was very patient. S/he did not know me, and I did not know her/him, either. But they always welcome everyone who’s new [to the OldKids online community] with open arms. It makes me feel that there are true feelings in this world. [Ms. Y]

Further exploration suggests that these older Chinese persons’ perception of the OldKids community as a Utopia may be affected by factors associated with both the behaviors and norms of individual members and those of the OldKids organization. On the one hand, in the OldKids community, members willingly, selflessly, and enthusiastically help each other to learn—without asking for money in return, which is in sharp contrast to the market-driven practices in contemporary China. This peer teaching/learning process has also provided members with unique, rich opportunities to form meaningful social relationships that provide much needed companionship and emotional support for these older Chinese people. On the other
hand, the OldKids organization has also played a—most likely unplanned—role in the formation of this utopian perception. It does so through its active self-promotion of being a “nonprofit” organization whose goal is to provide “community service” for older adults in Shanghai. Also, the three cofounders of OldKids are widely perceived by the majority of OldKids members as having a “spirit of dedication” or “spirit of selflessness,” which certainly reinforces the perception that this community is not money driven.

Ironically, as will be discussed below, the organization’s relabeling of being nonprofit is merely a strategic choice of seeking money to survive, and the three cofounders are straightforward in admitting their money-driven motivations behind all of their operations and practices. Why, then, do so many OldKids members still perceive the OldKids community as a Utopia? These issues are examined in detail below, through an overview of the history and development of the OldKids organization and key characteristics of the current OldKids community.

11.4.1 Learning and Relationship Building in the Oldkids On-/Off-line Community

Peer teaching/learning and relationship building are accomplished both online in the OldKids online community and off-line in the OldKids computer classes and salons. First launched in early 2000 (which was the peak time of the Internet boom in China), OldKids was originally a private, for-profit company targeting the older Chinese consumer market. Three young Chinese men who had just graduated from college started the business with their own savings and money borrowed from relatives and friends. Motivated by the worldwide.com fever, especially the success of Amazon.com, these three cofounders initially wanted to build an Amazon-like B2C (business-to-consumer) Web site targeting older Chinese consumers. After only several months of operation, however, they quickly realized that this business idea was not going to succeed anytime soon, simply because at the time there were not very many older Chinese people who knew how to use the Internet, not to mention how to use it to purchase goods. The dramatic bursting of the Internet bubble during that time also meant that the company had little chance of getting venture capital and thus had to survive on its own.

The cofounders decided to move from online to off-line: that is, to focus on computer/Internet training for older adults (in the physical world) to cultivate the potential customer population of their Amazon-like Web site and, more immediately, to generate revenue from the training classes. By the time of this study, OldKids had trained more than one thousand older Chinese people in Shanghai to use computers and the Internet. OldKids computer classes typically take place at an Internet café where OldKids has rented two rooms (which are well equipped with the newest computer hardware and software, high-speed Internet access, and central air conditioning) for members to use
from Monday through Saturday mornings. Each OldKids computer class typically lasts four to eight weeks. During this period, students meet once per week to learn from the instructor, who is usually also an older person. To attract more students, OldKids has been keeping the class fee to approximately $15 to $30 per person, which is significantly less expensive than similar computer classes offered by other organizations.

In addition to the computer classes, OldKids also encourages and helps participants of their computer classes to organize computer salons so that they can continue meeting with and learning from their peers after the completion of classes. Although this practice does not directly generate revenue for the organization (membership is free), it is beneficial to the organization in that it helps to keep the students with the organization beyond the relatively short period of the class duration. And the students like this opportunity as well, because many of them feel that, after completing a computer class from OldKids, there is still a great need for continuous learning and practice (Xie 2007a). In fact, participating in an OldKids computer salon after completing an OldKids computer class has now become “a tradition” in the OldKids community.

There are several key differences between the OldKids computer classes and the computer salons. First, the former lasts for weeks, whereas the latter may last for years; second, the former provides opportunities for older Chinese people who have shared interests—but did not know each other before—to get together and start interacting and forming relationships, whereas the latter ensures the continuity of this interaction and relationship development. Third, the former features instructor-based training/learning, whereas the latter features peer training/learning (Xie 2007a). Engagement in such a peer-teaching/learning practice requires members’ willingness and dedication in helping each other and sharing their computer knowledge and skills. And there is abundant willingness and dedication in this community, as the following quotations illustrate:

I participate in OldKids salon activities. The friends there are of great help to me. If I have any questions, I’ll ask when we meet at the weekly salon meetings. We discuss each other’s questions. If anyone knows the answer to my question, s/he will help me; and vice versa. The salon meetings are very good in helping us learn. [Ms. C]

It’s very common in our [OldKids computer] salon that, if you have any problem, someone will immediately help you solve it. We all feel...
that, once we’ve learned something, we just couldn’t wait to teach it to other members of our salon. [Ms. S]

While the main focus of the OldKids organization has shifted to off-line computer training, the OldKids Web site still functions. Considering the short history of OldKids and especially the low Internet use rate among older Chinese people, the OldKids online community is quite successful in terms of providing older Chinese people—especially current and former students of OldKids computer classes who live in Shanghai—an online environment in which they can interact with peers. It does so by providing interactive services such as online forums, text, and voice chat, and instant messaging. My interviews with these older Chinese people and participant observation in the OldKids online community have revealed that each of these interactive services has primarily fostered one unique type of social support: online forums for informational support, instant messaging for emotional support, and online chat for companionship (Xie 2008b). The informational support—information and knowledge about computer skills, tips, and news—exchanged in the OldKids online forums is especially appreciated by these older Chinese people, particularly because they often have difficulties getting help with their computer problems from other sources, including their own adult children and other younger people (Xie 2007a).

For instance, one participant commented that, in today’s market economy, he would not dare to ask a young person for help with computer-related problems if it might take more than ten minutes of the young person’s time. This is because, he explained:

In the planned economy era, I could have asked young people for any questions I might have about computers and they would have always been willing to help me, no matter how many questions I might have asked and how much time it might have taken to help me solve my problems … But now [in the market economy era] more and more people care about themselves, while fewer and fewer people care about others … [Mr. N]

In comparison, in the OldKids Internet community, members can always get help from others to solve any computer problems they may have—and for free. Many participants tell the stories of how members of the OldKids online community are always willing and eager to help others without asking for money in return, as the following quotations illustrate:

I don’t really have any particular person to contact [to seek help]; but if I have any questions about computers or the Internet, I can just post my questions in the [OldKids online] forum and many people will come and help me. I have seen too many people who did not know such things as uploading music; but now they all know how to do it. They all learned from others. [Ms. T]

I did not know how to make birthday cards, so they [other members of the OldKids online community] started teaching me. I started
from the basics. Many people in this online community have taught me. In this community, as long as you ask questions, somebody will answer you. In such an environment you will feel that, because everything I know is from others, if I know something that can be helpful to somebody, then I’d love to share with her/him, too. This is the most important thing I’ve learned in this community. I think that there are true feelings in the online community. The online community is not about money; it does not want your money. [Ms. Y]

In addition to the valuable informational support, members enjoy and appreciate the emotional support and companionship exchanged in the OldKids online community. While informational support is exchanged primarily in the OldKids online forums, companionship or interaction that is sought for purely social, enjoyable purposes (Rook 1995, 1987) occurs primarily in the online chat rooms. Emotional support is sought and received primarily via instant messaging, the private mode of computer-mediated communication (CMC) available in the OldKids online community. Details about these OldKids members’ use and perceptions of these different modes of CMC have been reported elsewhere (Xie 2008b). The point of the most direct relevance to our discussion here is that the social interactions and relationships developed in the OldKids online community, and the informational and emotional support and companionship exchanged in this online community, may have all helped to shape these members’ perceptions of the OldKids community as a “Utopia.”

11.4.2 OldKids as a “Nonprofit” Organization with Three “Selfless” Cofounders

In addition to the learning and relationship-developing opportunities available in the OldKids online and off-line community, another important factor that may have contributed to the participants’ utopian perception is the OldKids organization’s strategic choice and active self-promotion of being a “nonprofit” organization. This choice was made because although the off-line computer training generates some revenue for the organization, it is still far from sufficient to keep the company running. To survive, OldKids has been actively promoting itself as a “nonprofit organization that provides community service for seniors” (Wu Hanzhang, chairman and cofounder of OldKids). This new position makes it much easier for the organization to gain support from the government as well as individual members. For one thing, interviews with several governmental officials at various levels and branches of the Shanghai government—especially those in charge of senior-related matters—reveal that the officials have widely acknowledged and positively responded to OldKids’ nonprofit position.

The Shanghai government, indeed, has become the major revenue source for OldKids. For instance, in 2003, the Shanghai government organized two major events—the “One Million Families Online Campaign” (OMFOC) and the “Internet Surfing Project for Seniors” (ISPS)—to promote the adoption of the Internet in
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Shanghai among underprivileged social groups such as unemployed middle-aged women and older adults.* OldKids, because of its new computer training focus and the “nonprofit” image, was easily selected by the Shanghai municipal government as one of the main contractors to provide training services during both citywide Internet-promoting events. Doing this kind of contracting work for the Shanghai municipal government generated approximately two-thirds of the annual revenue for OldKids. It also helped to promote and reinforce the nonprofit image among OldKids members.

Another factor that may have contributed to these older Chinese persons’ utopian perception of the community is that the three cofounders of OldKids are widely perceived by members as having a “spirit of dedication” (Feng Xian Jing Shen) or “spirit of selflessness” (Wu Si Jing Shen). In fact, during the interviews many participants repeatedly mentioned that such a spirit of the three cofounders is an important reason for the formation of the OldKids Shi Wai Tao Yuan, because the three of them have shown the rest a “good role model” to follow (see the quotations above).

Ironically, however, the cofounders of OldKids have their own agenda, which is exactly what the members thought they were able to avoid in the OldKids Shi Wai Tao Yuan: to pursue monetary gain for personal interests (instead of selflessly dedicating themselves to help their seniors). During the interviews, the three cofounders of OldKids did not attempt in any way to hide their true intention. They all frankly admit that their primary goal is to make a profit. For instance, one of the cofounders explicitly stated:

> Of course we want to make a profit. As a private, for-profit organization, we want to and have to make money. That’s the only reason why we have been doing all these since the very beginning. The seniors’ market has great potential. Especially in big cities like Shanghai, seniors’

* In March 2003, four branches of the Shanghai municipal government—the Women’s Association, Information Technology Office, Office of Cultural Affairs, and Science and Technology Association—initiated the OMFOC. The primary goal of this three-year campaign is to, between 2003–2005, train one million Shanghai residents, especially women in the age range of thirty-five to sixty who are unemployed, laid-off, or retired, to use computers and the Internet. The municipal government hopes that, by educating one person per household about computers and the Internet, this campaign can influence one million Shanghai families and therefore improve the overall use and adoption of computers and the Internet in Shanghai. Several months later, the Shanghai Seniors Working Committee Office, Science and Technology Association, and Seniors Foundation started the ISPS. This three-year project has three main objectives: to (1) train 100,000 older adults age sixty and above to learn and use computers and the Internet, (2) establish one hundred training bases for seniors (each training base has at least twenty computers with Internet connections), and (3) establish one thousand community centers for older adults to surf the Internet (each center has at least three networked computers). According to Wu Hanzhang, Chairman and cofounder of OldKids, and also Sun Pengbiao, director of the ISPS, the main idea of the ISPS—i.e., to help seniors get online—was originally proposed by OldKids and later on adopted and promoted by the Shanghai government as a governmental project.
retirement pensions are usually pretty good. An ordinary retired blue-collar worker normally has about RMB 1,000 per month. For retired intellectuals and cadres, their monthly pension would be even higher, around RMB 2,000. There are more than two million seniors in Shanghai … This is a really promising market; it has great potential. We hope that we can make a profit from this big market … [Wu Hanzhang, Chairman and cofounder of OldKids]

This view as described by Wu Hanzhang here is clearly market/money driven. In other words, it clearly shows that the activities that OldKids has been engaged in are no different from any other types of market activity. Why, then, would most OldKids members believe that the cofounders were just being selflessly dedicated to serving the seniors?

One possible reason is that so far OldKids has not charged much for their computer training service, even though this is because the cofounders have realized that it is the only way to attract more students to sign up for the computer classes and, in turn, to expand the population of older Internet users. To say it slightly differently, the cofounders have come to realize that, in order to make a profit from the seniors market, it is necessary to first nurture and expand the market by helping more seniors use the Internet, as the following quotation illustrates:

We have found that seniors’ conceptions of consumption are quite problematic—if you charge them too much, they won’t come, even if they have no problem affording the fee. You know how stingy our seniors are. They will only come if the price is really inexpensive. So we have lowered our price, because we want to first help more seniors use the Internet. We don’t plan to make money from the training at the present time. Our current goal is to nurture and expand the market so that we’ll be able to make a profit in the near future, when there are more seniors using the Internet … [Wu Hanzhang, Chairman and cofounder of OldKids]

In short, OldKids provides inexpensive service at the present time because it is the only way the company can survive and also because the managers believe doing so for now will help them profit in the future. Thus, the real motivation for the OldKids cofounders to provide inexpensive computer training services for seniors is directly market driven, and selflessness or dedication has never been the real motivation behind their behaviors.

It is worth mentioning that a few OldKids members have gradually become aware of the market-driven motivation of OldKids. One OldKids member who also participates in another senior-oriented online community—SilverHair (Yin Fa), comments on the differences between these two online communities:

SilverHair is created and maintained by seniors, and OldKids is managed by young people. The former is quietly but practically doing
good things for seniors for free, while the latter has more emphasis on money. OldKids likes to keep a high profile for itself. [Mr. D]

Another OldKids member expresses even stronger and more explicit criticism of OldKids’ market-driven services. He explicitly called the OldKids organization “overcommercialized” and pointed out that “nothing is free” here and that the cofounders “just want to make money.” [Mr. Z]

Although a few members have begun to realize the market-driven trajectory of OldKids, the majority of members perceive OldKids as a Shi Wai Tao Yuan, or is “unpolluted” by the market system. Such a perception might be a result of OldKids’ effort to actively promote itself as an organization that provides not-for-profit “community service,” an image that is backed up by the current low price of its service. However, this perception held by most OldKids members might also be an indication of older Chinese persons’ desperation in finding allies—especially among the younger generations—who are willing to share their old values and beliefs. Disappointed and marginalized by the market system and its accompanying new values and beliefs that have come to dominate Chinese society in the past two and half decades, older Chinese people are struggling to find a refuge where their values and beliefs can still mean something to both themselves and those around them. Therefore, they are willing to accept the image promoted by OldKids, as long as it holds certain truth at the present time.

11.5 Beliefs, Norms, and Resistance

Regardless of the precise reasons behind these OldKids members’ perceptions (and whether or not these reasons are justified), the majority of OldKids members’ shared view of the OldKids community as a Utopia may well reflect sharp conflicts between two socioeconomic systems. In contemporary market-driven Chinese society, material enjoyment and personal interests are encouraged; in comparison, in the old economic and social systems that were in place when these older Chinese people were growing up, the emphasis was on spiritual pursuits and public interests (Jiang and Ashley 2000). The older Chinese generation feels confused and frustrated in the reform era, when the values and beliefs they had held so dearly now appear to be outdated and even scorned. The Internet has become a beacon for these older Chinese people because its spirit is largely coincident with that of these older Chinese people, e.g., equality, devotion, and sharing valuable things (like software and information) for free. In this sense, these older Chinese Internet users are creatively using the Internet to resist market-oriented changes and to restore and maintain the values and identities acquired during their youth. To use Ryff’s (1989) terms, these older Chinese people have shown signs of being autonomous individuals because each one of them is “self-determining and independent, able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways, regulates behavior from within, evaluates self by personal standards” (p. 1072).
Similarly, based on online ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 1998, Christensen (2003) reported in *Inuit in Cyberspace: Embedding Offline Identities Online* that Inuit cultural identities have been extended and preserved in the online world. He wrote: “Instead of disembedding computer interaction from off-line life, Inuit are generally embedding off-line life into cyberspace, creating and asserting continuity in their lives—building on a continuum that has a strong influence in their worldview conceptions without necessarily polarizing reality into extremes of what is real or not” (Christensen 2003, p. 18). Christensen’s findings among Inuit are similar to what I have found among the older Chinese participants, who are also using the Internet to continue and preserve their identities. Note that both groups—Inuit and older Chinese people—are marginalized (socially, politically, economically, and especially technologically), and yet, once they have learned the technology, they are using it as a new approach to continue, rather than discontinue, their old traditions and identities. These findings provide empirical evidence that the online world or how the Internet is used and perceived is indeed affected by the off-line world—more specifically, off-line factors such as identities that are formed and developed in the physical world prior to the introduction of the technology.

In the edited volume, *Chinese Society, Change, Conflict and Resistance*, the contributors addressed reform, resistance, and protest in various topical areas in contemporary China (Perry and Selden 2003). Although the contributors did not address issues related to information technology and aging, their discussions of “resistance”—more precisely, “everyday resistance”—is of particular relevance to the discussion here. Perry and Selden (2003) point out that “much everyday resistance is invisible” and that this type of resistance “takes such forms as private acts of evasion, flight and foot dragging, which, in the absence of manifestos or marches, may nevertheless effectively enlarge the terrain of social rights” (p. 2). Following this argument, it appears that the majority of older Chinese participants’ view of the OldKids Internet community as a Utopia is a new form of resistance—that is, everyday resistance to the market system and changes that are inevitably associated with and caused by the transition from a planned economy to a market one. Compared with the modes of resistance discussed by Perry, Selden, and their contributors (2003; e.g., private acts of evasion, flight, and foot dragging), however, this form of resistance as found among these OldKids members is more mild and subtle, and, consequently, even less visible.

Older Chinese persons’ resistance to the newly established market economy systems is not unique to the Chinese context. Rather, it is well documented that citizens of former socialist nations—including the former Soviet Union and Eastern European nations that have also gone through dramatic transformations in a short period of time—miss the kinds of job security, medical benefits, housing, education, and other elements of social welfare as well as the warm social and personal relations and other values that they were used to and had enjoyed before the transformations (for a review, see Tang and Parish 2000).
Farquhar and Zhang (2005), based on their ethnographic study of older residents of Beijing, argued that “The aspects of Maoist life that people of this age remember positively are the orderly parts, and the aspects of modern life they dislike are those that buy progress at the expense of order.” This study did not find explicit evidence that could support Farquhar and Zhang’s argument about how older Chinese people were nostalgic about “the orderly parts” or stability that was featured in their youth. However, it found that equality, devotion, and free sharing appeared to be the main aspects/values that OldKids members missed the most, contributing to their dislike of the current market system.

An important question to consider is whether the OldKids Internet community as a Utopia is an illusion or reality. On the one hand, it might be an illusion because the cofounders as well as other employees of OldKids clearly have their market-oriented agenda. On the other hand, however, OldKids members themselves have indeed been demonstrating their dedication and selflessness while interacting with one another online or off-line. As such, there appears to be a solid ground for OldKids members’ perception of the OldKids Internet community as Shi Wai Tao Yuan. Thus, this analysis does not suggest that the Shi Wai Tao Yuan perception that the majority of OldKids members hold is a total illusion that may not last long. Interestingly, this utopian view of the Internet community is only found in the OldKids case study—in the case study of a primarily U.S.-based online community, SeniorNet, members do not have similar perceptions of the SeniorNet community, even though they have also selflessly dedicated themselves to helping one another (Xie 2006a, 2007c). This further suggests the influence of the Chinese context in these older Chinese persons’ perceptions, beliefs, and norms.

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