Chapter 10
Mum's the Word:
A Case Study of Students' Intergenerational New Media Literacy in Shanghai

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ABSTRACT

In 2009, for the first time, Internet penetration rates in China have surpassed the global average level with over 298 million users (CINIC 2009). In this burgeoning of use, one of the largest and oldest social networking systems (SNS) in China, QQ, has become part of the daily diet of many Chinese both in cities and big towns. In this chapter I explore the role of QQ — and SNS more generally — through a case study of university students studying in Shanghai. As I posit in this chapter, QQ has become a rite of passage for the migrating youth leaving home to study in another city or country. As the first generation to grow up within the IT educational reforms that saw a growing importance placed on new media and Internet literacy, these ba ling hou students are passing on their knowledge to their family and friends back home, demonstrating that SNS is far from the prerogative of Western, middle-class youth. In particular, SNS is creating new ways for intergenerational connectivity and contact in the face of growing geographic mobility.

INTRODUCTION

'If I was a fish then QQ would be my water.'

(Bao, 25 year old, male postgraduate student)

In 2009 Chinese Internet usage surpassed the global average with over 298 million users (279 million of these being broadband users), to become the number one user of the Internet (CINIC 2009). This phenomenon is particularly evident in China's voracious use of social media such as blogs, where they have more users than any other nation. Just as Internet take-up rates in the developing world are increasing faster than in the first world, all-be-it from a lower base, so take-up rates in this the largest of the developing countries

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are now increasing sharply among lower-income and less-educated people.

And just as the order and rate of take-up differs among divergent socioeconomic groups, so too do the software applications and the hardware access routes of choice. Many millions of Chinese make use of the Internet through personal computers and social networking applications that would be familiar across the globe. But for many millions outside of big cities (like many countries in Southeast Asia and Africa), the only entry route to the Internet is via the mobile phone — not the Personal Computer — employing applications that are particular to that group of users and their mobile platforms. This diversity of users, platforms and socio-cultural demographics is reflected in China's diverse Social Networking Sites (SNS), and in particular, is reflected in QQ, China's oldest SNS, where many different services cater to diverse platforms (many of which are free) and modes of access.

So while technological infrastructure and access to the Internet are still predominantly an urban phenomena in China, changes have occurred in rural areas with the number of rural Internet users reaching nearly 85 million (CINIC 2009). In short, the growth rate of rural Internet usage now far exceeds that of urban Internet usage. While the Internet is mainly accessed via personal computer in urban city areas by the middle and upper class, the hundred million odd migrant working class — along with the rest of China's predominantly working class demography — deploy GPRS (General Packet Radio Service) for Internet access via the mobile phone. In China's undulating landscape of the twenty-first century, class (as a socioeconomic category) continues to be a dominant factor influencing the types of emergent technocultures. This technocultural template is marked by both class and geo-spatial (rural and urban) features; the diverse characteristics of socioeconomic class shape, and are shaped by, the numerous types of technocultures that on a different scale come together in shaping and reshaping contemporary China.

In this rise of Internet access among these dynamic economic and geographic groupings, the increased uptake of social media is notable. In China's varied technoscape numerous types of SNS — representing different classes, communities and lifestyle clusters — can be observed. Broadly speaking, these SNS fall into two technocultural trajectories; sites such as Renren (akin to Facebook), Kaixin (used by female 'white-collars' [workers]) and MSN are accessed via a personal computer and are often all simultaneously opened and used on someone's desktop; whereas Fetion and the aforementioned QQ differ in the important respect that they can be accessed both via mobile phones or via computers.

In this chapter I explore the role of QQ — and SNS more generally — through a case study of university students studying in Shanghai. As I posit in this chapter, QQ has become a rite of passage for the youth leaving home to study in another city or country to keep in contact with friends and family at home. As the first generation to grow up within the IT educational reforms (such as the ten-year Chinese Education Research Network called CERNET) that saw a growing importance placed on new media and Internet literacy, these *ba ling hou* students are passing on their knowledge to their family and friends back home, demonstrating that SNS is far from the prerogative of Western, middle-class youth. For many of the parents of the *ba ling hou* have never used the Internet, let alone SNS. Though discursive routes such as mobile phone Internet via GPRS, these older generations — often from lower socioeconomic backgrounds living in country towns and occasionally illiterate — are able to gain entrance into twenty-first century media practice.

In this chapter I will firstly discuss SNS literature in general, moving onto the particular technoculture of China — and specifically Shanghai. The context of Shanghai presents a very particular