Chinese Women and the Cyberspace

Edited by
Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce

Amsterdam University Press

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The idea of working on a research topic on 'Chinese women and their network capital: the use and abuse of the cyber-network' took off when I was awarded a research grant by the University of Hong Kong. As the research came to fruition, I began to explore the possible idea of organizing an international conference to bring together scholars who are interested in working in this area to share their views and to bring together an edited book on this topic. This has resulted in an international symposium in 2004 on the theme: 'Log on: Chinese women and the cyber-networks' that I organized under the Centre for Anthropological Research at the University of Hong Kong. This international symposium brought together scholars from different parts of the world who presented various issues of Chinese women and their experiences with the cyberspace. The final session of the symposium was a workshop where the conference participants discussed key ideas that emerged in the course of the two-day symposium and we were able to concretize the ideas that would be put into the edited book. Subsequently, I invited some of the conference participants to write for this edited book.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the University of Hong Kong for a research grant that enabled me to conduct the research on 'Chinese women and their network capital: the use and abuse of the cyber-network' which allowed for the seed to be planted at the initial stage. I am also grateful to my former dean, Professor James Tang, who kindly provided a conference grant to enable us to organize the international symposium. I am extremely indebted to my graduate students, especially Gao Chong, Huang Yedan and the administrative colleagues at the Department for helping with all aspects of the conference. I am delighted to acknowledge the contributions by the conference participants for their enthusiasm and ideas and especially so to those who have contributed to this edited volume.

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K-PKE
April 2008

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1 Introduction

Locating Chinese Women in the Cyberspace

KUAH-PEARCE Khun Eng

1 Introduction

In the information galaxy, the cyberspace and the Internet have become an indispensable part of our daily routine. Those who have been touched by this technology have found it irresistible to refrain from using it, even if they are physically on the move. It is no wonder that with the advent of the wireless, tapping into cyberspace and surfing the Internet has intensified among all groups of people.

In present day, the cyberspace and the Internet have become enmeshed into our daily routine and social experiences, so much so that they are not only confined to our working life but increasingly they have penetrated into our social and personal spheres. Likewise, they are no longer viewed as a masculine space and tool as women have not only embraced but also used the cyberspace to negotiate and reframe themselves within existing social structure.

Women in general and Chinese women in particular have also become formidable players in this virtual galaxy. Increasingly, they are both the producers and consumers of the cyberspace and the Internet. Through their involvement in the production of technology, as well as in the development of software and creation of all types of Web 2.0 generations cyber-platforms for all to consume, women in increasing numbers nowadays work to produce the hardware that lubricate the running of the cyberspace. At the same time, they are one of the greatest consumers – engaging in ferreting knowledge from the cyberspace as well as engaging in interactivity communication.

The primary objective of this edited volume is to explore what Internet and the cyberspace mean to the Chinese women and how they use the cyberspace for their own agenda from a socio-anthropological perspective. In this aspect, cyberspace serves as a kind of social capital and enables these women to forge cyber-social networks and communities to facilitate their activities and needs. Furthermore, cyberspace can be turned into a repressive instrument that intrudes into women's private lives and oppresses them by unscrupulous players. From the various

groups of Chinese women studied, either empirically, from online survey, online interactivity and communication with the netizens, or simply Web-surfing, the use and the abuse of the Internet and cyberspace can be categorized into the following. First, it provides an alternative channel for information gathering and an agency to complete mundane tasks that they had to do manually before the digital age, such as bill payments. Second, it serves as a platform for self-expression when they find that they are unable to share their emotions and feelings with their family members and friends. Third, it serves as a repressive platform to reinforce oppression and patriarchal dominance. Fourth, it serves as a form of social capital to allow for cyber-communication and the formation of cyber-networks and cyber-communities for social, economic and political purposes.

2 Chinese Women Negotiating the Cyberspace

Today, the routine use of the cyberspace has resulted in women accounting for half of its use in big cities throughout the world. Given this widespread use, it becomes imperative for us to understand more concretely how and why women use them and what impacts the cyberspace has on these women.

2.1 Cyberspace as an Alternative Channel and an Agency

Earlier studies on this subject have expounded two prominent views: one that argues for the cyberspace and Internet to be regarded as an agency where women would benefit from it. Such technology empowers women and provides a virtual space to communicate and articulate their own needs and desires as well as to explicate the feminist ideology and actions using this new found technology. The other perspective is that such technology could lead to abuse and women, in fact, would suffer socially and emotionally from the use, thereby entrenching them further into the existing social structure and reinforcing patriarchy (Adam & Green 1998: 83-97).

One key area of our study is to examine how women make use of the cyberspace for information, work, employment, shopping, love, sex and marriage. As an information agency, the Internet and the Worldwide Web arm women with knowledge, thereby enabling information transfer. In this study, we found that women used the cyberspace to facilitate and ease their daily chores, such as bill-paying, or for searching for information on education, employment or marriage purposes. They also use it for the purpose of organizing political activities and online shopping. Here, we concur with the argument that the use of the cy-

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