Uyghurs on Chinese Social Networking Sites: The Creation and Destruction of Ethnic Youth Culture

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Abstract

The Chinese social networking website Fenbei.com was started in 2003 by a young Chinese software engineer. By 2006 it provided an important online community for tens of thousands of Uyghurs, who developed an online culture and communication genres through which they creatively engaged in a virtual world with thousands of others who shared their interests. By 2010 the site was closed, stranding these Uyghurs and millions of other Chinese citizens without the online site that had become their virtual community and connected them to other users around China and even abroad. This article attempts to uncover a small part of what Fenbei meant for young Uyghur Internet enthusiasts and fills some of the gaps in research on popular Internet use in China.

Keywords

China – Uyghurs – online censorship – Fenbei – Great Firewall

* The author thanks a number of people for help on this project, including some Uyghurs whom he cannot identify because of repercussions they might face. Others outside of China include Greg Fay and Henryk Szadziewski from the Uyghur Human Rights Project and the helpful responses from Danah Boyd, Jason Ng, and Jason Wen Yau Lee, who mostly helped by confirming that Fenbei.com and other Chinese social networks have been little studied. The author's attempts to get further information from Archive.org about webpage data they have stored, have not received any replies. Pseudonyms have been employed for users who have posted political materials. The author also thanks his anonymous reviewer from *Central Asian Affairs* for helpful comments.

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The Chinese state's management of Internet activity receives enormous attention from news media and academic studies, with the regime's contradictory policies and political ineptitude barely concealed behind condescension and self-righteousness. The many ways that enthusiastic Chinese Internet users find to circumvent absurd government obstructions (widely known as "the Great Firewall") provide engaging research narratives. Numerous studies also focus on the readily identifiable links between Internet communication and viral accounts of scandals, rumors, violence, and political repression.2 However, the fascinating story of the popular Fenbei music sharing and social network site, which attracted millions of young Chinese members from 2003 to 2009, has been neglected. This article focuses on the thousands of ethnic Uyghurs who maintained pages on Fenbei between 2005 and 2009.

Uyghur personal webpages on Fenbei reflected the attitudes, aspirations, and interests of these young, computer-literate Uyghurs. Although most of their online interactions were oriented toward social contacts and entertainment, their expressive activities also reveal their ideas about cultural, social, and political life in China, and they undermine Chinese government claims that there is a broad-based Uyghur separatist movement rooted in strong sup- port for Islamic values and opposition to Chinese rule. In fact, this popular site revealed that the overwhelming majority of Uyghur members were social moderates who enjoyed experimenting with the possibilities of social net- working online and connecting with international and cosmopolitan cultural trends. They participated in both wider Chinese cultural trends and ideas, andthey took advantage of the Internet as a medium for exploring cultural forms from outside of China's borders.

Nonetheless, some aspects of Fenbei's Uyghur pages do suggest disengagement from other Chinese citizens because these users did not have many "friend" links or interactions with non-Uyghurs. Fenbei and other online social networks used by Uyghurs do demonstrate that differences in culture, experience, and interests limit their online interactions with non-Uyghurs, and thus social networking appears to promote *intra*-ethnic interaction more than *inter*-ethnic interaction. My analysis here shows that Uyghurs borrowed from

2 Key general studies include: Michael S. Chase and James C. Mulvenon, *You've Got Dissent! Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies* (Santa Monica, ca: Rand Corporation, 2002); Zixue Tai, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Yongnian Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China* (Stanford, ca: Stanford University Press, 2007). Exhaustive monitoring of Chinese government Internet controls as well as of official and unofficial attacks at home and abroad is conducted by GreatFire.org (https://en.greatfire.org/).

online Han Chinese culture but also subverted or resisted aspects of Han culture that were imposed through social expectations and website structure. Uyghurs online create their own ethnically marked cultural forms as well as borrow cultural materials from abroad that tend to distinguish their online practices and pages from those of most Han Chinese. Chinese websites pro- vide resources that Uyghurs use for self-expression and socializing, but few make direct social links to non-Uyghur Chinese society. Nonetheless, their participation in shared online Chinese culture is more extensive than the limited ways that Uyghurs distinguish themselves. The most important distinction found on Fenbei pages was the use of the Uyghur language, but many users I describe here seem to have been more comfortable using Chinese on their webpages and used Uyghur text infrequently. Another common indicator of cultural orientation was the selection of music: some users included diverse recorded music and videos on their pages, but their selections often reflected a dominant preference for either Western, Chinese, or Uyghur popular music.

The present article focuses on the characteristics of Uyghur self-presentation and social interaction on the Fenbei site within the context of Chinese Internet controls and the specific history of Fenbei. This study is a broad out- line of the many issues that are raised by this site and its young, educated, socially mobile, cosmopolitan users. I emphasize the ways that Uyghurs used this website for entertainment and play, involving a variety of styles of interaction and experimental engagement with images, ideas, and practices. Many issues needing further attention can only be mentioned here; particularly how social networks leave enduring, public records of playful interactions that would be intimate and fleeting among friends in offline settings.3

The Chinese Internet

Most studies of Chinese government controls on the Internet focus on the mechanisms of filtering and deleting pages and sites. Extensive government projects have used technology to assess and monitor denials of access to

3 Some of these themes are studied elsewhere: the moral panic about personal political expression and play with personal identity is not only a Chinese government reaction to youth culture online, but can be found in many contexts. See, for example, Brian Simpson, "Identity Manipulation in Cyberspace as a Leisure Option: Play and the Exploration of Self," *Information & Communications Technology Law*, 14, no. 2 (2005): 115–131. Similarly, the public presentation of emotions and narratives that are generally reserved for close friends generates anxiety about "oversharing" or inappropriate self-presentation. See Ben Agger, *Oversharing: Presentations of Self in the Internet Age* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

information, which take the form of obstructing or redirecting connections and detecting keywords in content in order to suppress data during transmission.4 The other widely studied practice is the deletion of content on a page- by-page or post-by-post basis on China-based online social networks and bulletin boards.5 In the largest research project to date, described as "reverse- engineering" of the many aspects of censorship, the researchers conclude that their results give "rigorous support for the recent hypothesis that criticisms of the state, its leaders, and their policies are published, whereas posts about real-world events with collective action potential are censored."6 This research shows that the most widely censored content was that relating to mass-action events that might be stimulated or organized through online postings and discussion. However, the project did not assess the special treatment of minority regions, and the authors thus fail to note that service providers routinely delete materials relating to Uyghurs, Islam, and Xinjiang on social networks in order to avoid legal problems from the government. This has been carefully detailedin the report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project, *Trapped in a Virtual Cage*.7 Taking the UHRP results into account, it seems important to extend the conclusions of King, Pan, and Roberts to this dimension of ethnic discrimination or "profiling." The current regime of pre-emptive censorship of online activity

4 Xueyang Xu, Z. Morley Mao, and J. Alex Halderman, "Internet Censorship in China: Where Does the Filtering Occur?" in *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Passive and Active Measurement* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2011), 133–142; Charles Guangchao Feng and Steve Zhongshi Guo, "Tracing the Route of China's Internet Censorship: An Empirical Study," *Telematics and Informatics,* 30, no. 4 (2013): 335–345; Joss Wright, "Regional Variation in Chinese Internet Filtering," *Information, Communication & Society,* 17, no. 1 (2014): 121–141.

5 David Bamman, Brendan O'Connor, and Noah Smith, "Censorship and Deletion Practices in Chinese Social Media," *First Monday,* 17, no. 3 (2012); Jason Ng, *Blocked on Weibo: What Gets Suppressed on China's Version of Twitter (And Why)* (New York: New Press, 2013); King-wa Fu, Chung-hong Chan, and Michael Chau, "Assessing Censorship on Microblogs in China: Discriminatory Keyword Analysis and the Real-Name Registration Policy," *Internet Computing, IEEE,* 17, no. 3 (2013): 42–50.

6 Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "Reverse-Engineering Censorship in China: Randomized Experimentation and Participant Observation," *Science,* (August 22, 2014): 345 (6199), 1251722 (http://www.sciencemag.org/content/345/6199/1251722.full.pdf); Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism But Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review,* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–343.

7 Uyghur Human Rights Project, *Trapped in a Virtual Cage: Chinese State Repression of Uyghurs Online*. (Washington, dc: Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014). Accessed at: http://docs .uyghuramerican.org/Trapped-in-A-Virtual-Cage.pdf. The authors are apparently Henryk Szadziewski and Greg Fay, who sign the acknowledgements.

by Uyghurs suggests that policymakers and those carrying out surveillance and control of the Internet in China view anything a Uyghur does online as potentially related to collective action. The present article shows the absurdity of such a position.

Xinjiang Internet Controls and Uyghur Online Activism

The study *Trapped in a Virtual Cage* is a broad overview of Internet usage in Xinjiang since the first Uyghur site appeared in 1998. The authors carefully examine the literature on Internet regulation in China and integrate it with information drawn from news reports, academic studies, and interviews with Uyghurs about the conditions of Internet use in Xinjiang. They show that under the draconian censorship regime in place since the riots of July 2009, described below, the continuing growth of the Internet across most of China reversed course in Xinjiang, with many sites closed down and the remaining ones under strict controls. Because their goal is to understand government regulation of Uyghur Internet use, the UHRP study does not report extensivelyon the content of Uyghur political sites. However, many other studies, led by the pioneering work of Dru Gladney, have focused on this question.8 Many of

8 Dru Gladney's paper "Cyber-Separatism and Uyghur Ethnic Nationalism in China" was initially circulated in 2003 and then published as part of his book *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago, il: University of Chicago Press, 2004). More recent studies include: Yu-Wen Chen, "Who Made Uyghurs Visible in the International Arena? A Hyperlink Analysis," Fairfax, VA, George Mason University, Global Migration and Transnational Politics (GMTP) working paper, 2010, http://cgs.gmu.edu/ wp-content/uploads/2013/03/gmtp_wp_12.pdf (accessed April 8, 2015); Yu-Wen Chen, "Trans- porting Conflicts via Migratory Routes: A Social Network Analysis (SNA) of Uyghur International Mobilization," Singapore, NTS-Asia Research Paper No. 5, 2011, http://www .researchgate.net/publication/262835768_Transporting_Conflicts_via_Migratory_Routes_A_ Social_Network_Analysis_%28SNA%29_of_Uyghur_International_Mobilization (accessed April 8, 2015); Yu-Wen Chen, *The Uyghur Lobby: Global Networks, Coalitions, and Strategies of the World Uyghur Congress* (London: Routledge, 2013); Rucker Culpepper, "Nationalist Competition on the Internet: Uyghur Diaspora Versus the Chinese State Media," *Asian Ethnicity*, 13, no. 2 (2012): 187–203; Işık Kuşçu, "The Uyghur Diaspora in Cyberspace: Identity and Homeland Cause," *Bilig: Türk Dünyası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi,* no. 69 (2014): 143–160, http://yayinlar.yesevi.edu.tr/index.php?action=show_article&bilig_id=58&article_id=960, (accessed April 8, 2015); Kilic Kanat, "Ethnic Media and Politics: The Case of the Use of the Internet by Uyghur Diaspora," *First Monday*, 10, no. 7 (2005), http://firstmonday.org/ojs/ index.php/fm/article/view/1804/1684, (accessed April 8, 2015); Rizwangul Nur-Muhammad, et al. "Uyghur Facebook Use and Diasporic Identity Construction." Paper presented at the

these focus on the international dimensions of Internet activism, with sites addressing Uyghurs as well as those presenting political information to non-Uyghurs. The latter are the so-called bridge blogs identified by Xiao Qiang, Hossein Derakshan, and Ethan Zuckerman in the context of authoritarian regimes such as Iran and China.9 As far as I know, there has been no systematic analysis of the sites hosted within China and intended for Uyghurs living in China, other than the survey by Dilnur Reyhan.10 The UHRP study fills this gap somewhat by describing four dominant Uyghur sites and their fates during the shutdown and reorganization under new laws in 2010. Nonetheless, we still know very little about Uyghur use of non-Uyghur sites, although it appears to be quite extensive.

On the other hand, an article by Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa gives excellent first-hand insight into the catastrophic events of July 2009 and the key role of Internet communications.11 Somewhat like the Rodney King case in Los Angeles in 1991, where a huge riot was provoked in part by an amateur video of police beating a black motorist, Harris and Isa show conclusively that the Uyghur riots in Urumqi resulted from video recordings of attacks on Uyghur workers in a toy factory dormitory in Shaoguan in Guangdong province. These video recordings were circulated widely by Internet and cellphone and eventually led to violent street protests in Urumqi and days of interethnic violence.

In general, there have been few analyses of Uyghur Internet use beyond political activities, although most studies that discuss content suggest that explicitly political content makes up only 10–20% of pages in any society and, of course, much less within China. How Uyghurs in China use the Internet still awaits serious study. The current article is intended as an initial and suggestive overview of one important site. Analysis of Fenbei shows that Uyghurs using

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2013 IAMCR Conference, Dublin, Ireland, http://hdl.handle.net/10652/2231, (accessed April 8, 2015); Kristian Petersen, "Usurping the Nation: Cyber-leadership in the Uighur Nationalist Movement," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 26, no. 1 (2006): 63–73; Matteo Vergani and Dennis Zuev, "Analysis of YouTube Videos Used by Activists in the Uyghur Nationalist Movement: Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Methods," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 20, no. 69 (2011): 205–229.

9 Ethan Zuckerman, "Hoder's Talk At Berkman," *...My Heart's in Accra* [blog]. December 10, 2004, http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2004/12/10/hoders-talk-at-berkman/, (accessed April 8, 2015).

10 Dilnur Reyhan, "Uyghur diaspora and Internet," Paris: Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme, April 2012, http://www.e-diasporas.fr/working-papers/Reyhan-Uyghurs-EN.pdf, accessed April 8, 2015.

11 Harris, Rachel and Aziz Isa, "Invitation to a Mourning Ceremony: Perspectives on the Uyghur Internet," *Inner Asia*, 13, no. 1 (2011): 27–49.

this site had to have at least basic Chinese literacy, but most users customized their pages to create an innovative mix of communicative styles that fit well with an educated, culturally savvy, diverse, and cosmopolitan community of users. In particular, these users were able to access a wide variety of media materials from across the Internet and integrate them into their own profiles and use them as part of the social interactions on the website. My analysis is based mostly on materials I saved from the site beginning in 2007, but the limitations to my materials show the importance of more comprehensive ethno- graphic study of users interacting through such online social networks. I can investigate what users saw and posted on this site, but I can say little about the ideas, motivations, and experiences of the users because I have not talked to them directly, nor did I take on a user role myself.

My research for this article is based on 163888.net and Fenbei pages that I accessed and downloaded beginning in May 2007. I have complete homepages with all images only for 37 users, but I accessed another 200 pages before 2009 and preserved many images from them. In addition, I have been able to access another 400 pages through Archive.org (Wayback Machine) since 2010, although this archive unfortunately does not preserve the images, which are important content elements. From more than 10 million user pages reportedly hosted on the Fenbei site, Archive.org reports preserving around 200,000 pages. I do not have precise numbers for Uyghur users, but it is clear from my sample that there were tens of thousands, because I have encountered more than 5,000 unique user names and not seen much duplication. In other words, each page has links to between 10 and 20 other users, and I see little repetition of names even after examining around 600 pages. A comprehensive project using automated analysis of these pages would have little trouble harvesting a list of identities related to Uyghur pages for at least a rough guess of the total number of users. This would also be an important way to provide a more comprehensive statistical analysis of the music, texts, images, and other content that people used, as well as potentially quantifying how people interacted according to gender, ethnicity, region, age, and other factors.

Uyghur Use of the Fenbei Social Network

The Internet company 163888.net—rebranded as Fenbei.com in June 2007—ran a large, sophisticated, and well-funded social networking site that gained great popularity in China between 2003 and 2010. The degree of popularity is suggested by the fact that until 2010, when it ceased operation, the site attracted more interest than the popular microblogging *weibo* services, according to a comparison of the Latin-script search terms *weibo* and *fenbei* on Google Trends (searches for

weibo using Chinese characters moved ahead of those for *fenbei* in mid-2009). According to news stories about Fenbei, the site went from 2 million users in early 2005 to over ten million by late 2006.12 This explosive growth and high popularity was due to the convenient and powerful design of the site, which allowed users to create personal homepages and easily interact with other users by sharing and commenting on popular media and graphics. The site allowed users to create a personal profile, link to online acquaintances, and post graphics, music, and film clips. The pages had a similar structure to those of the popular Friendster and MySpace sites, except that functions were identified by Chinese language terms, although some English terms appear as well.

Uyghurs who used the site interacted with the software through Chinese commands, but they could also enter text in other scripts. Most Uyghurs used Chinese and other Unicode symbols that were written left to right, including Japanese and Cyrillic, but the site did not accept Arabic script. Many Uyghurs borrowed characters from different Unicode scripts to spell their names, as well as to create graphic images as part of their profile. The resulting user names and other words are often difficult to decipher such as _σAyTaN_& (shaytan, "devil") or 地li木ra提997 (Dilmurat997).

As shown in Figure 1, pages on the site were arranged with a profile panel in the upper left, where people posted either their own photo from a webcam or an avatar—usually a television or film star, model, or popular singer (generally European or East or South Asian). Some people had photos of couples, of Islamic themes, or more shocking images associated with anguished love, self-injury, or drug use. A very few used more political photos, including images of wolves, an image widely associated with Uyghur and Turkic political identities. One person used an image of Osama bin Laden as his avatar. Photos of models came mostly from other Chinese Internet sources, while the more provocative images came from a variety of sites abroad.

Under the avatar image was the user's name, usually in some mixture of Latin, Chinese, and other graphics, their age, gender, and province (the user's city and university were added as profile fields when the site was converted to Fenbei). Another field contained a numerical activity rating, varying from 30 to 10,000 or more. This number appears to be calculated based on duration of membership, number of friends and fans, and number of postings. Those with less than ten friends or fans generally have a rating under 100, while those with less than 50 friends or fans have a rating of less than 1,000, and the majority of the pages I examined, who tend to have more than 50 friends and fans, have ratings over 1,000.

12 Sujing Qingnan, (苏境情难), "Zheng Li (Fenbei Network Founder)" [郑立("分贝网"创始人)], http://baike.baidu.com/subview/524683/14547147.htm (accessed April 8, 2015).

Figure 1 *A typical fashion and love oriented page for a 22-year old woman named Zoragul (using the ordinary Chinese transliteration of her Uyghur name). She uses a photo of a European model for her avatar, and the first photo in her "journal" is of Bollywood star Amrita Rao (identified through Google image search). She has a popularity/ activity rating of 1,579. Her music collection includes eight songs, with only one with a Uyghur name, while the others appear to be Chinese pop songs or related to episodes of a television serial.*

At the bottom of the profile panel are buttons that allow the viewer to send a message to the page author, request to be added as a friend, to add oneself as a fan, or bookmark the page in the viewer's own profile. Under the profile panel is an introduction panel where most users put a combination of decorative graphics using a variety of character sets, and texts representing dominant interests, with love being the most common theme, expressed in Uyghur, Chinese, English, and symbols. Some users include other images, poetry, or Islamic themes. Below the introduction are a collection of fan avatars and user names identifying users who have clicked the fan button when visiting the page, and then bookmarks and avatars of recent visitors.

Figure 2 *The first eight of her 189 friends appear next. At least one, xinxin7115, appears to have a Chinese name, but four others are clearly Uyghur and three are more anonymous. Subsequent sections display thumbnail images for her one music club membership, the one video she has linked, and the first few of 14 photos she posted. Then comes the interactive "guestbook" on which 13 men have posted 15 notes between May 17 and May 25, 2007.*

The main area of the page (Figure 2), beginning to the right of the profile, includes a panel where users post digital recordings they wish to share, a panel displaying the user's posts of images and comments labeled "journal," and then panels showing avatars of friends, memberships in media sharing clubs within Fenbei, posted film clips, and a photo album. Under this is the main interactive space, modeled upon the "guestbook" on sites such as MySpace, but called here "leave a comment" within which visitors post images, create text graphics, and write greetings or comments. The average female user with a popularity rating over 1,000 gets two to five guestbook comments per day, mostly flirtatious comments from men. One woman with an Islamic-themed page also received many incoming comments, but without the flirtatious content, and generally using more Islamic address such as *assalamu alaykum* (greeting in Arabic, meaning 'Peace to be upon you') rather than the simple Uyghur greeting *yahximu siz*? ('How are you?') For example, Figure 3 shows a message of thanks and support in Chinese with religious comments in Latin-script Uyghur before and after that she received from a female user named Arzu (a pseud- onym). The Chinese text in the heart thanks the recipient for visiting, expresses support and repeats the Chinese phrase *jia you*, which is encouragement to persevere: "Go! Keep it up!"

Figure 3 *This preformatted heart element circulates through copying but was widely customized with different Chinese and Uyghur phrases: the bottom one means "may Allah be close/kind to us!!!"*

Although the 163888.com site was initially designed for sharing media, the music and videos that people post do not receive much attention, and most guestbook comments simply address the page owner and describe or imply the kind of interaction the commenter is inviting, rather than anything related to their musical tastes. Both film clips and music seem to be simply presentations of user preferences, providing some indication of their personality and interests, and decorating the page with content to explore. More important as both decoration and communication on most users' pages are the images posted by users on both their "journal" and photo gallery, as well as those posted by visitors in the guest- book. These images are the only place where Arabic-script Uyghur messages can be posted, so this adds to their importance in presentation and interaction.

Many of the written Uyghur messages are more decorative than directly communicative. They are created with specialized software that tends to make them less useful for composing novel messages: somewhat like photos, they become a repertoire of fixed images that are posted either as part of one's collection of favor- ite messages, or as conventionalized messages posted on other people's guest- books. The Uyghur texts, graphics and images in these messages are carefully designed for repeated use, and many, such as poems or image-stories are copied from one user to another. These image-messages are fixed to a greater degree than

messages written directly with left-to-right Unicode characters into message spaces. The content of the image messages can be divided into several types: messages from one user to another, such as the calling-card decorated texts that invite people to contact them, or more elaborate greetings and humorous images. Figure 4 shows a child's smiling face peeking under a tent flap and saying *bar mu ya?* (Is anyone there?). This also includes a text invitation to contact the poster with his name and QQ number (Tencent messaging user identity) inscribed acrossthe child's forehead.

Figure 4 *"Is anyone there?" Humorous calling card requesting that the recipient contact the poster using the Tencent QQ messaging network.*

The second kind of Uyghur text includes a wide variety of poems, short or long, not directly addressing a user and often placed in one's personal "blog" section. A third style combines poetic texts and images of romantic love and its woes. The fourth variety combines Islamic content and images. Narrative sequences are often made up of love imagery or Islamic imagery sequences and these can be read by scrolling down vertically. Most of the Islamic sequences have less narrative drama, but some do suggest movement from a destructive life to one of harmony through Islamic piety. The sequences of love images usually present narratives of blissful love that break down into tragic loss. Figure 5 shows one common image found at the end of such love narratives: a colored pencil drawing of a bare-chested young man whose heart has been ripped out, clutching his chest and gazing over his shoulder at the receding back of a woman wearing jeans and a backpack, and carrying his still bleeding heart in her hand. In one version of this image the superimposed caption in Uyghur says "Do you still remember the day you abandoned me?" Using Google image search I found this same image, without captions, on sites out- side of China related to Pakistani and Turkish music, but there was no indication of who might be the original artist.

Uyghurs on Fenbei were mostly avid young consumers of novel cultural forms, seeking to experiment with different ideas, genres, and social groups, while some challenged dominant cultural practices and values. In general, the Fenbei site allowed people great freedom to express a range of interests and personal commitments. Many people seem to be shaping their online identity in creative ways, but in the context of the partial anonymity allowed by this kind of social networking site, some users took stronger positions than they might express in more direct social contacts. The love narratives that are so common show that many users felt free to display their personal emotional lives in ways that most would only do with close friends if not for the distance afforded by the Fenbei site. In some cases users included material that suggests rebellion against dominant values or at least a critical perspective toward the popular culture found on others' pages. For instance, while more than 70% of users focus on social interaction around friendship, fashion, and poetry and include images and messages linked to love, less than 10% display predominantly Islamic images, including Uyghur language versions of verses from the Koran, images from Mecca, images of young people studying or praying, or occasional exhortations to others to be more attentive to religious practice.

Experimentation and challenge to dominant ideas about self-restraint can be classified within partly overlapping general categories. The following themes and dominant interests are arranged in decreasing order of popularity; each category contains a spectrum from less to more extreme expressions:

Figure 5 *One version of a popular image used in image-narratives about lost love.*

- *Romance, love, and sexuality*: many expressions of generalized love, sometimes for a particular beloved, often with ecstatic and tragic aspects. Often expressed with narratives and poetry. More provocative forms involve images of pain, revealing clothes, and sexually suggestive activities or poses.
- *Popular culture imagery*: fashion models, sports, film and tv stars, and popular musicians. Very few politicians and no one from other cultural spheres appear, such as academics, scientists, or elite culture performers. More pro-

vocative images include rap musicians making obscene gestures or semi-naked models.

- *Religion*: display of strong Muslim identification, images of devotion, and sometimes criticism of lifestyles that do not conform to strict interpretations of Islam. The rare extremist expressions include militant Islam and even threats toward people not conforming to proper Islamic behavior, as discussed below.
- *Social iconoclasm*: violent and self-destructive imagery, drug use, and pornographic images. Some images linked with suffering and tragic love show people cut and bleeding and holding razors or needles. A very few male users with links only to other men posted nude images of women taken from foreign sources.
- *Political imagery*: Uyghur nationalism, political Islam, terrorist imagery, and Hitler. Wolf images are the most subtle expression of Uyghur nationalism but still appear on less than five percent of pages, while Rebiya Qadeer and Osama bin Laden appeared once each on the more than 200 pages that I was able to check.

Analysis of Interactive Processes

While most interactions on Fenbei involved effusively friendly and supportive sentiments, some people's more iconoclastic interests and commitments stimulated other kinds of online interactions. A salient and attractive feature of social networking sites is that people not only interact with each other, but do this before an audience, through which they can expand their connections to new people or sometimes display antisocial or extreme positions to a wide audience. Personal pages on social network sites invite engagement and inter-action, but not always in positive ways.

The degree of openness to interactions depends upon the individual and the controls the site provides. Interactions on the guestbooks of 163888.net and Fenbei could be seen by others and helped link the community because one could visit the pages of contacts and see who they were in contact with, find out about them, and potentially interact with them as well. Even if someone did not interact with others directly they might borrow ideas and graphics from their pages, thus extending the community beyond the limits of direct contact and creating a circulating repertoire of shared knowledge, emotional expression, narratives, and images.

It is difficult to know much about the extent of undesirable interaction on this site, or how people responded to it. Most public interactions are friendly

and regulated by the public nature of the postings. People posting on another's guestbook generally do so publicly, although some messages can only be viewed by the recipient.

Analysis of the full range of social relations, including contacts and selection of interlocutors, and kinds of offline interaction would require more ethnographic research. What we observe on 163888.net and its successor, Fenbei, are the more public performances, but nonetheless, posters do expose them- selves emotionally in many cases and respond to others in quite personal ways. Users experiment in their self-presentation through media materials, expressing opinions and ideas, and interacting with others. They post mostly content that they like themselves and think will appeal to others. Even flirtatious con- tent follows canons of politeness and shows appreciative attraction intended to produce a positive response from the person addressed. However, there are also more provocative messages in which a poster shows less respect or is confrontational.

The three examples I mention here represent uncommon levels of provocation and confrontation, including what appears to be trolling, in which a per- son is intentionally troublesome because they want to generate negative responses.[13] Unfortunately, because the guestbooks display only part of an interaction, we mostly see one side of a provocation or response. A rare flirtation that veered toward the disrespectful appeared when a man posted on a woman's guestbook an animated gif image of a woman jogging in her under- wear, and wrote next to the image in Uyghur, "is this you?" followed by his QQ number, apparently inviting her to contact him. There was no indication of her response.

In another case, a man with some images of partially nude women on his page received a comment in the form of an Arabic-script Uyghur image text from a militant Muslim: "Uyghurs consider themselves Muslims. … But they show by their actions that they are not Muslims." The next comment contained an image from the same user showing five masked men, two holding machine guns and two holding rocket launchers, thus directing an implied threat at the recipient. The author of this menacing post appears to have created his page only on May 7, 2007, and posted this on May 13. He had a low activity rating of 83, with no friends and only two fans, but on May 12 and 13 he received 15 guest-book postings from 13 users, apparently in response to his new activity. Among

13 For detailed analysis of trolling from the perspective of politeness theory, see Claire Hardaker, "Trolling in Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication: From User Discussions to Academic Definitions," *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behavior, Culture*, 6, no. 2 (2010): 215–242.

the posting users are three with avatars showing people carrying machine guns, while four of the others have Islam-oriented avatars. Through militant images and critical posts, this new user appears to have rapidly attracted interest among the few militant and Islamist users. This was the only place on the Fenbei site that I found representations suggesting Islamic militancy. No other Muslim-themed pages that I saw included such images.

The final example of confrontation is difficult to describe precisely: one user posted a link to an image on his own journal, inviting visitors to click and view it. Some of the users who do so respond with horrified comments about the image, writing that it is "haram" (an act that is forbidden by Allah) and sinful and asking the poster, "Are you the child of a Uyghur or the child of a dog?" Another asks if the poster is a donkey. I have no way of knowing what the image was, but the responses suggest that it was a shock image intentionally posted to generate such disgust, which is an established form of internet trolling.

These unusual cases reflect the ways that people explored the limits of social interaction on the site, as well as some of the efforts to control others who were perceived as exceeding acceptable limits. Some users experiment with more extreme images or rebel against social conventions, and others attempt to use the public nature of the guestbook to pressure or otherwise sanction people—or at least to express displeasure and thus make their own position clear. Interestingly, there was no apparent suggestion that people were afraid they were violating the law or risking arrest through their activities, although it does appear that most provocative material was posted by people who concealed their identity and avoided posting clear photos of themselves.

It is important to point out that the dominant culture of the Fenbei website is much easier to describe accurately than these marginal cases. We cannot say much about users who post pornographic, terrorist, or extremely political images: their activity is very limited, they have few social contacts, and they intentionally avoid identification. We have no way of knowing if the posters are playfully trying to *épater le bourgeois*, sincerely presenting their commitment, or perhaps even *agents provocateurs* serving the agendas of the Chinese or foreign governments. In the final analysis, it is difficult to cut off these unusual cases from the broader spectrum of (serious?) play in which, for example, common experiences such as love are explored through romantic experiences of pleasure or pain, but then connected to erotic images or those of physical suffering. Clearly, one crucial element of these sites is the interaction among people with deeply different values and tolerance for others, and encounters on these sites provide ways to explore the diversity of society, including its seamy sides, even if partially fabricated.

The Fate of Fenbei

Fenbei fell victim to legal restrictions on Internet activity, but not because of the activities that appeared on its own site. The Fenbei case provides fascinating insights into the development of Chinese Internet businesses in relation to popular culture and the political, legal, and regulatory spheres. The original site was one of the first and most prominent among those dedicated to social networking, and it provided easy and flexible ways for users to create and customize personal webpages and connect with others. Media could be easily added to one's own page or posted onto the pages of others. This latter ability made Fenbei and sites like it a threat to the government: it provides an attractive and easy way to post semi-professional and homemade content that expresses personal opinions and tastes. People crafted and circulated materials that suited their interests, and because these could easily be widely shared, people were able to participate in online circulation of new, provocative, or even subversive ideas and cultural materials. The texts, images, videos, and sound recordings were all readily customized by users to integrate new ideas into existing popular sentiments and to spread ideas through linking, reposting, and commenting.

The founder of 163888.net, Zheng Li, was born in 1982 and graduated from Sichuan University's Department of Physics and Computers at age 20. Through a friend he met a number of people who shared digital recordings of their music online but were frustrated that there was no site dedicated to such activity. Zheng conceived of a website that could be the platform for people to share their original music productions. He built the website with three friends with an initial investment of 2000 yuan (about us$ 300), and officially launched in June 2003 on a subscription model. Through a series of contracts with musicians and recording companies, the site developed a pro- file that attracted media attention and users, despite a brief closure by Chongqing authorities in July 2004 because "rogue" users posted porno- graphic images on their pages. The hit song "Mice Love Rice" was released on the site late in 2004 and by February 2005 the site had attracted 2 million registered users. In April 2005 the site received a us$ 2 million venture capital investment from the international firm IDG in exchange for a 20% stake. The news account reports that Zheng's pitch included the claim that the company already had 60% of the online music market in China.14 Because of ongoing media attention and partnerships with well-known performers and

14 Sujing Qingnan, "Zheng Li."

media companies, the site continued to expand rapidly and had 12 million registered users in late 2006, when they were able to get $us 6 million in investment from the venture capital arm of Shanghai Bell-Alcatel for a 12% stake in the company.

In June 2007, on the fourth anniversary of its founding, the company was renamed Fenbei (the term *fenbei* means "decibel"). After this point there is little information about the company's activities until its legal difficulties. A few news stories point to the low advertising revenue and rising competition in 2007, and one specifies that Facebook representatives met with Zhengli and offered to buy Fenbei (then with a reported 15 million registered users) for us$ 15.4 million.15 Instead, for unknown reasons, Zheng Li decided to try to raise money through participating in a side venture providing technology to connect erotic performers with paying viewers. He seems to have thought this would not expose him to accusations of illegal activity.

The differing accounts of Zheng Li's legal trouble suggest it stemmed from Fenbei's ongoing problems with limited revenue from advertising and user subscriptions. According to one account, this led some employees to leave the company in 2008 to explore other business opportunities, including a network of nude chat and other pornographic sites based in Chongqing.16 Somehow Zheng Li was persuaded to participate in this project, which started operations in mid- 2008 and came under investigation by April 2009 by the Jingzhou City (Hubei province) Public Security Bureau. While Fenbei attracted roughly 20 million users in five years of operation, these porn sites already had registered 30 million unique visitors by the time they were investigated. They also had generated large revenues. News accounts are vague, but it appears that the network enabled independent content-producers to bill customers and deliver live online video, while the network operators imagined they could claim they had no involvement in the illegal activities of the content producers. The network and content producers appear to have reaped a 20 million yuan profit in six months.17 Zheng was convicted of distributing pornography, sentenced to six years in jail,

15 Xiong Haiyan, "Fenbei Network Sale Price is Pending While Xiaonei.com Seeks 30 Million us$," [分贝网待价而沽校内网要价3000万美元]. *Chinabyte*, (December 7 2007), http://net.chinabyte.com/154/7706154.shtml, (accessed April 8, 2015).

16 Ao Xiangfei, "Sources Report That Court Case Will Lead to an Uncertain Future for Fenbei Network," [消息称分贝网不会因涉黄关闭今后走向不明朗] *Chongqing Daily*, (January 4, 2010), http://tech.QQ.com/a/20100104/000162.htm, (accessed April 8, 2015).

17 Gan Lihua, "Former Online Network 'Business Hero' Arrested for Porn Network," [昔日网络"创业英雄"因办色情网站被捕] *China Youth Daily*, January 7, 2010, http://tech.163.com/10/0107/06/5SDHB81O000915BF.html, (accessed April 8, 2015).

and fined 500,000 yuan. The 20 million yuan profit and three company cars were also surrendered.18

Fenbei was "temporarily closed" as a result of Zheng Li's arrest, but this closure became permanent without any clear explanation, and there has been no user activity on the site since that time. The mystery surrounding the shuttering of an enormously popular and legitimate Internet business is redoubled by the complete lack of attention to its fate in the Chinese news media. One follow-up report in May 2010 did attempt to find out from Shanghai Bell-Alcatel about their motivation for investing in Fenbei, but the reporter was turned away with the claim that no one could speak about it because the vice-president had left the company.19 In addition to searching online news for information, I have asked users and Internet researchers for their insights, but no further details seem to be available on the fate of the company.

The Chinese government crackdown on Internet pornography began in early 2009, but it seems likely that it was a device to tighten controls over the Internet as a whole, as suggested by a writer at *Forbes* magazine.20 However, it could also be that the popularity of this site run by a very young entrepreneur did not please more-established business leaders that ran other sites, or per- haps Zheng Li was entrapped in order to eliminate him and his site as competitors. Yet another scenario, as one Uyghur suggested to me, is that Fenbei was closed to warn other Internet providers not to support illegal activities. What will probably never be clear is whether the tens of thousands of Uyghurs using the site, and their open experimentation with international cultural forms, were one of the reasons that the government allowed this popular site to be completely closed down without providing any continuity for users and their extensive data and social networks. By allowing the site to be put into a temporary suspension and then making it permanent without any organized transition or options for users, all of the site's value as a business and as a cultural institution was lost.

The most recent mention of Zheng Li and Fenbei is on a long list of poorly run Internet companies that were not able to generate a profit or failed for other reasons. In fact, the first 15 years of the Chinese Internet (1994–2009) are

18 Sujing Qingnan, "Zheng Li."

19 Yang Meng, "Shanghai Bell Fenbei Investment Loss is Nearly us$ 6 Million." [上海贝尔投资分贝网或损失近600万美元], http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2010–05–19/11514206492. shtml, (accessed April 8, 2015). The original source, "Securities Daily" zqrb.com.cn, appears to be defunct.

20 Gady Epstein, "China's Porn Trick," *Forbes* (March 1, 2010): 32.

now viewed as a wild and unruly era,21 which fits nicely with the government's decision to begin policing more actively in 2009.

Conclusion

The results of this rather preliminary research are more suggestive than definitive. The years before the 2009 riots in Urumqi and the subsequent stricter government control of Uyghur Internet use show Uyghurs' optimistic and cosmopolitan engagement with Internet culture, in which they developed characteristically Uyghur Internet communication styles. Although these websites began mostly as music-sharing sites and seem to have had more engagement between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, the expansion in Uyghur use in 2006 and 2007 meant this ethnic community could interact more among themselves, using more exclusive texts in Uyghur, either written in Latin script or through computer-generated image texts in Arabic-script Uyghur.

These Uyghur webpages in China show that most users were decidedly moderate in political orientation, interested in socializing around popular culture and love, and perhaps embracing a somewhat extreme view of tragic love, and connecting it to dramatic images of physical pain. But there is little of the political radicalism that appears in overseas Uyghur websites. This is, of course, partly because of government controls, but appears to show that these Uyghurs are not interested in political involvement, at least online. They could have demonstrated political sympathies on these websites with some of the many low-key nationalist symbols, such as images of wolves, politically tinged user names, or references to Huns or the Beauty of Loulan.22 That they did not indicates that other interests were more important to them. While a very few Uyghurs deployed nationalist and militant Islamist imagery, other less political social experimentation and rebellion was more common. Appearing on a social networking site rather than in contexts of social hierarchy and subordination, this was not really James Scott's "everyday resistance," but rather the

21 Lin Jun, *The Fifteen Boiling Years: The Chinese Internet from 1995–2009.* [沸腾十五年—中国互联网1995–2009]. The author cites this book on his blog and discusses Fenbei. com as an example: http://linjun1024.blog.techweb.com.cn/archives/93, (accessed April 8, 2015).

22 For more discussion, Matteo Vergani and Dennis Zuev, "Production of Solidarities in YouTube: A Visual Study of Uyghur Nationalism," *Sociology of the Visual Sphere,* (2013): 83–107.

formation of communities and creation of cultural materials that challenged convention and allowed for personal expression.23

It is important to understand the content of these sites, because it shows that many Uyghurs do not hold the sentiments found on the overseas websites that have been widely investigated, where nationalist activists seek to promote Uyghur autonomy and draw world attention to the repression of Uyghurs. The long-distance nationalism discussed by Benedict Anderson and others does not match the more pragmatic position of most Uyghurs within China.24 The Fenbei homepages undermine Chinese government efforts to label Uyghurs asradicals and separatists. At least these Uyghur Internet users were clearly not linked to activists abroad, whether in the form of Rebiya Kadeer, the World Uyghur Congress, or the East Turkistan Independence Movement. Almost no one was promoting the causes of these organizations and individuals. Fenbei demonstrates that at least before 2009, before the Chinese state decided to eliminate threats posed by both the Internet and Uyghurs, the Internet pro- vided something like a civil society with enough breathing room where even minorities did not have to constantly worry about their relationship to the state and could get on with the business of being citizens in a multiethnicstate.

Unfortunately, the Chinese government bears the blame for demonizing Uyghurs and promoting bias and even violence against them, both in the international community and at home. The government has been ineffective in suppressing biased policing and social policies.25 Many Han Chinese believe their government's accounts of radicalized Uyghurs willing to carry out violence against them, whether in the factory in Shaoguan in July 2009, or on the streets in Urumqi ten days later. The profiling of Uyghurs as Islamist and separatist promulgated by China's government stands out in people's minds far morethan the moderate positions taken by most Uyghurs in their daily life in China. By deleting a site where thousands of Uyghurs were clearly not promoting violence and separatism, the government left space for more negative images

23 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, ct: Yale University Press, 1987.

24 Benedict Anderson, "Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics," Amsterdam: Center for Asian Studies, Wertheim Lecture, 1992; Benedict Anderson, "Exodus," *Critical Inquiry*, 20, no. 2 (1994): 314–327; Daniele Conversi, "Irresponsible Radicalisation: Diasporas, Globalisation, and Long-Distance Nationalism in the Digital Age," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38, no. 9 (2012): 1357–1379.

25 Joanne Smith Finley, "'No Rights Without Duties': Minzu Pingdeng [Nationality Equality]in Xinjiang since the 1997 Ghulja Disturbances," *Inner Asia*, 13, no. 1 (2011): 73–96.

of Uyghurs to circulate online. The moderation and tolerance of these Uyghur Internet users, combined with their obvious lack of complaints about the discrimination they face in daily life and on the Internet, demonstrate that Chinese society can promote tolerance and cooperation with minority ethnic groups, but the government's intolerance and lack of concern for these all-important social dimensions of civil society limits venues for constructive social engagement.

The Fenbei site reflects what computer-literate young Uyghurs were able to do by combining their social and cultural interests with the resources of a popular national social network website. Its extinction, combined with new strict controls on Uyghur Internet use, has undermined the clear benefits of such social networking. Even from the position of an authoritarian (and frightened) government, it is difficult to see how Uyghurs displaying overwhelming disinterest in nationalist or separatist symbols or antisocial activities, was a bad thing. To draw Uyghurs back to the possibilities of social multiethnic networking in the current censorship climate, in which most sites impose profiling and prevent Uyghurs from having equal access to Internet resources, will be difficult. Fenbei was not a paradise of ethnic harmony, but only because it was not harmonized into sterility. The presence of extremes on such websites reflects the organic life of a community—or civil society—in developing its own culture and social controls.