**Donkey Friends: Travel, Voluntary Associations and the New Public Sphere in
Contemporary Urban China**

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This research examines the rise of voluntary associations of "donkey friends," accompanied by the emergence of new types of cultural identities, interpersonal relationships, and social networks in contemporary urban China. At the end of the 1990s, the native term "donkey friend" (*lüyou* 驴 友) became a popular self-identifier for Chinese backpackers who formed voluntary communities to facilitate group travels and many collective activities. My research is based on three months of preliminary field research in 2003 and 2004, and a year of fieldwork in 2005 in Beijing, Yunnan Province and Inner Mongolia. I carried out participant observation in three voluntary donkey friend communities, and conducted anthropological interviews with donkey friends, journalists, tourist guides, professors, and publishers. My field research was multisited, including face-to-face interaction in different locations and Internet research. The Internet phase is important because backpacker travel has co-evolved with the Internet forums in China. Both online interaction and offline travel experience served to cultivate a sense of fellowship among travelers. Donkey friend communities have not only provided social and emotional support for their members, but also allowed individuals to engage in various voluntary projects based on free association, self regulation, and practices of many democratic values. By contextualizing this phenomenon with the retreat of the state from many public realms of Chinese society, I argue that donkey friend community demonstrates the rise of the new public sphere of middle class in

post-socialist urban China. Participants in this sphere no longer pose a direct threat to the state, but aim to promote cultural change, challenge cultural values, and raise public consciousness. They seek to practice democratic values and resolve specific social problems. This research not only offers an ethnographically-based study of new cultural forms that accompany the development of backpacker tourism in China, but also contributes to the anthropology of China by providing a detailed analysis of the formation of new urban communities and public spheres in which neoliberal values of production and consumption can be challenged by the emergence of new forms of cultural identities, horizontal ties, and collective actions.

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 1990s, the newly-coined term "donkey friend" (*lüyou*) became a widely used self-identifier among China's backpackers, particularly those who organized themselves into virtual communities on the Internet, focused on previously nonexistent recreation and leisure opportunities. These include mountain climbing, hiking, automobile touring and mountain skiing for wilderness-adventures, and touring the Old Town section of Lijiang in northern Yunnan's Naxi areas for more urban and ethnic experiences. The term's precise and literal translation, which is "donkey friend," may be somewhat opaque in meaning, as it is a pun on a pair of near homonyms, with "donkey," or "lü" in the second tone (驴), sounding similar to and even identical in some dialects to, "travel," or "lü" with the third tone (旅). Differing from the animal's less-than-flattering image in the West of a lazy, dumb beast of burden alternately timid and stubborn, it has in the eyes of the Chinese backpackers a more desirable set of qualities and associations, those of perseverance, endurance and amiableness, hence the quick adoption of donkey as a group icon for Chinese backpackers. Styling themselves as not only "donkeys" but also "friends", Chinese backpackers stress the elements of companionship on the road and fellowship by forming voluntary associations and engaging in collective actions.

Backpacker tourism is a very recent and novel concept for mainland Chinese and its emergence was rooted in the specificities of the political and social environment at the particular historical moment. Travel has a considerable history in China, but tourism as a modern industry

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only emerged in the 1920s in Shanghai and was soon interrupted by a series of upheavals that wracked the country. Recreational travel virtually disappeared for the three and a half decades of the Mao era. With its often plain connection with the elite class, the cultural past, and the "sacred" sites visited for religious and imperial purposes, tourism was inevitably held to be an "old and feudal" practice and ruthlessly suppressed (Sofield and Li, 1998). Only with the advent of Deng Xiaoping's "open door" policies of 1978, with a shift of state policy from stressing class struggle to pursuing the project of modernization, did the tourist industry reemerge. Tourism was promoted for its perceived contribution to the nation's modernization. In a series of talks given by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 and 1979, Deng proposed that efforts should be made to develop tourism as a newly emerged industry and be integrated into the national economy, in order to serve the country's goals of Four Modernizations[1] (Zhang and Xie, 2005).

The decades since 1978 have brought tremendous changes to all areas of social life in urban China, particularly in economic and cultural spheres. The emergence of donkey friend tourism reflected these radical changes. Market economy was launched in the early 1980s and, despite setbacks and unevenness, took off in regions with more favorable natural endowment and state subsidy, with the result that an increasing number of Chinese became affluent enough to travel for pleasure, a status marker indicating possession of a "style" of life which was their "own" and "alternative" to the undifferentiated humdrum. The new economy grew symbiotically with new cultural values, which became an important ground for identification and competition among China's generation of youth, who were born after the reforms and raised in affluent urban

[1] In December 1978 at the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee, Deng Xiaoping announced the official launch of the Four Modernizations, formally marking the beginning of the reform era. The Four Modernizations were in the fields of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense.

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nuclear households. With the loosening of the hitherto all-important ideological ties with work units and familial obligations to older kin, China's urban youth are eager to abandon conventional parameters of life in search of new styles, spaces and values, with which they can distinguish themselves as new middle class citizens of post-socialist China. It is against this socioeconomic background that Chinese donkey friend tourism has emerged and flourished.

The social origins of the contemporary backpacker can be traced to the late 1960s and early 1970s, when a growing number of western youth traveled on long-term, multiple-destination journeys with flexible itineraries to the Third World countries (Ateljevic and Doorne 2004). It was a particular mode of travel, made possible by the increasing economic affluence and triggered by a heightened reflexivity about the ill consequences of modernization. Western backpacker tourism was rooted in the counter-culture hippie movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Cohen 1973), stressing freedom and mobility (Ateljevic and Doorne 2004), and aiming to search for a more "authentic" experience (MacCannell 1976). With its embedded connection with modernization and cultural critique, backpacker travel has become an ideal site for studying modern and post-modern conditions, and thus given rise to an increasing number of works in the tourism literature dealing with economic, socio-political and cultural significance of backpacking.

As backpacker tourism has been increasingly seen as a global phenomenon and backpackers are seen as "global nomads" (Richards and Wilson 2004), few studies were conducted to understand backpacking culture from the perspectives of non-Western countries, despite the huge upsurge in the number of backpackers from many Asian countries and their

striking presence in nearly every destinations covered by *Lonely Planet*.[2] Cohen has thus called for the widening of the scope of study to emergent backpacking from non-Western countries, and urged scholars to consider the specific historical and social contexts within which backpacker tourism has emerged. Such detailed studies from other countries "would enable us to formulate a comparative framework relating the crucial experiences of the youth in their different countries of origin" (Cohen 2004: 56).

My dissertation takes the rise of this new alternative travel style as the point of departure to examine the formation of new cultural identities, interpersonal networks, and urban public spheres that are interwoven with the broader cultural transitions that took place at the turn of the last century in contemporary urban China. Since 1978, tourism has been seen primarily as an activity of economics, rather than of people, with the result that social and cultural implications of tourism have been largely overlooked; we know practically nothing about the impacts of tourism on the tourists themselves. How are travelers affected by what they see, do, and experience during their travel? What particular social, political, and environmental conditions in Chinese society give rise to certain types of leisure travel or particular types of tourists? And in the case of donkey friend tourism, what compels donkey friends to favor seeking travel companions on the Internet and to travel in large groups? How do they use travel resources on the Internet and travelers' networks to empower themselves to achieve various goals and exert influences? How do the formations of traveler communities facilitate collective actions and transform the dynamics of urban public spheres (see chapter 6) in contemporary China? These

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[2] *Lonely Planet* (LP) was the first popular series of travel books aimed at backpackers and other low-cost travelers. As of 2004, it published about 650 titles in 118 countries with annual sales of more than six million guidebooks.

questions are still dimly understood in both Western and Chinese scholarship, and answers to these questions will be especially useful for the comparative study of backpacking in tourism studies, as well as illuminative of the broader cultural transitions that China as a whole is experiencing.

In this chapter, I will first approach the study of travel from a socio-historical perspective, addressing the transformation of meanings and significance of travel in the history of China from the imperial era to the Republican period (*minguo*) and Maoist era. I will particularly look at two types of travel – Buddhist pilgrimage in the 17th and 18th century and the "Great Linkup" (*dachuanlian*) during the Cultural Revolution – both of which drew large numbers of people to travel in groups and both sprang up from bottom-up initiatives and nurtured wide horizontal alliances among travelers. The historical account of types of travel and travelers' groups will provide a comparative perspective on tourism studies that attest to the significance of travel in defining cultural identities and nurturing new types of social networks, although the negotiation and mediation of these processes essentially followed the contour of local power configurations.

From 1978 onward, Deng's regime promoted modern tourism as an industry and fueled the leisure travel with new meanings and dynamics, which not only revived certain "sacred" landscapes previously patronized by emperors, literati and pilgrims, but also recast many places as "treasures of the motherland", entailing state discourses about national territory and modernization. It is against this socio-political background that I examine the rise of donkey friend tourism, and argue that this alternative travel style provides a counter-hegemonic discourse about travel and place.

1.1   "TRAVEL" IN THE PAST

1.1.1   "Travel" in Imperial China

Travel can be translated into Chinese as "*lü*", "*xing*", "*you*" or the combination of the two such as "*lüxing*" or "*lüyou*". Every single word has multiple meanings and can create new meanings if combined with other characters. When they are used for travel activities, "*lü*" originally refers to pilgrimage or travel of armies, "*xing*" moving or walking, and "*you*" travel on the water. The combinations among themselves or with other Chinese characters can create words that refer to different types of travel activities, such as "*zhenglü*" (征旅) meaning a military trip and "*youchun*" (游春) meaning sightseeing in spring (see Guo 2005: 41-44). The difficulty of finding a precise Chinese equivalent to "travel" in English suggests a considerably more complex and heterogeneous cultural context regarding the meaning, imagining and significance of travel in the Chinese society. Travel has a long history in China, and travel writings abound in Chinese literary history. Many of these writings varied in forms ranging from lyrical essays to objective records of places and some classical travel prose and poems are still widely read in Chinese middle schools and universities today. Despite the ample evidence attesting to the significance of travel in constituting Chinese culture and literature, the studies of Chinese travel culture and travel subjects are relatively scarce.

A number of Western scholars have tried to capture the unique travel experiences in ancient China by translating Chinese travel accounts and diaries written by literati primarily during the Tang and Song Dynasties and compiling them into anthologies (Strassberg 1994, Reischauer 1955a, 1995b; Meskill 1965; Hargett 1989). With comprehensive annotations and

comments, these anthologies provide us valuable insights into the types, motivations, and experiences of earlier journeys and their cultural manifestations in religion, arts, philosophy and imperial ideologies. Chinese travel culture was also represented in the studies of Chinese pilgrimage that played an important role in the emergence of individual travels and group outings made by ordinary people to the places of religious, imperial and cultural significance. These studies were compiled into the book titled "*Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*" by Susan Naquin and Yu Chun-fang (1992). The collection of nine essays offered a detailed account of changed meanings of travel as engaged by various classes of people, and traced the processes by which geographical places were transformed into the "sacred" sites in the popular discourse.

Both the translation works of ancient literati travel diaries and works on Chinese pilgrimage offer an excellent lens through which multiple layers of meanings of travel in the history of China can be teased out. In their study of Chinese pilgrims, Naquin and Yu insist that in order to understand the cross-cultural meanings of pilgrimage, we must "shake off the influence of Western religions [along] with their clear definitions of religion and believer, identifiable acts of worship, and assumption of hardship as part of pilgrimage journey" (1992: 3).

Similarly, tracing the literary history of Chinese travel writings, Strassberg pointed out the different ways by which travel was defined, perceived and experienced, which constituted the larger sociopolitical contexts and reflected the ideas and teachings of the classical philosophers of the time period (1994: 17). The ideological meanings of travel continue to guide the perceptions of today's travelers and give shape to the ways in which travel is appropriated by the state and individuals. During the Spring and Autumn period, the Confucian school and the writers of the *Zhuang Zi* (庄子) formed two complementary visions of how travel affected moral and spiritual wellbeing of travelers. Classical Confucianism formed opinions about travel from

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the standpoint of its project of self-cultivation and ruling the world with ritual behavior (*li*). On the one hand, lamenting the gradual disintegration of the centralized Zhou feudal system due to the rapid mobility of new local elites, Confucius (551 – 479 B. C.) saw the spontaneous, unconstrained movement based on personal desire as antithetical to the project of *li* and practice of humaneness (*ren*) Confucius asked people to "restrain the self and return to rituals" (*ke ji fu li*). Personal leisure travel was discouraged in the scope of the state because it could destabilize and loosen the bonds of *li*. A traveler was often criticized for failing to fulfill filial responsibilities.[3] On the other hand, Confucius encouraged limited excursions into Nature as an act of self-cultivation, so that travelers could "discover scenes of moral symbols that would illuminate the ideal qualities of the Noble Man" (Strassberg 1994: 20).

In contrast to travel as a purposeful activity aiming at restoration of moral and political order, Zhuang Zi's perception of travel can be glossed in the phrase "free and easy wandering" (*xiao yao you*), "a liberation from the unnatural constraints of society, a spiritualized venturing forth into the unrestricted realm of authentic being" (Strassberg 1994: 21, 22). As an alternative vision to Confucian ideology, Zhuang Zi reaffirmed a self-centered view of travel, which inspired many later travelers who constantly sought freedom and contentment from journeys to the nature and used travel as the solution to escape from the strife of worldly chaos.

Despite the differences, both Confucius and Zhuang Zi tended to see travel as imbued with moral and spiritual significance, and landscape as highly symbolized, and even personified. They both stressed the enormous impact of voluntary movement in space on the stability of the

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[3] Confucius' famous saying about filiality "You should not travel for too long when your parents are still alive, if you have to do so you must have reasonable reasons" (*The Analects*) is deemed as a universal truth by generations of Chinese.

state and family and the harmony of individual wellbeing. These attitudes were in sharp contrast with the popular motifs of quest and conquest in Western travel discourses, which provided the historical and intellectual foundations for the emergence of modern tourism that evolved in the age of exploration, discovery and imperial expansion. The Chinese classical perception of travel as such might have resulted from the sedentary lifestyle and lack of strong maritime or colonial traditions in Chinese history. In his book *From the Soil*, anthropologist Fei Xiaotong characterized Chinese society as fundamentally immobile and Chinese people as inseparable from the soil (1992). He argued that Chinese people from the early times knew how to farm and led sedentary agricultural lives on the riverbanks. While pastoral lifestyles, upon which many Western societies were evolved, drew people to move from time to time, the agricultural way of life rooted farmers to one place (41). While Fei rightly pointed out the cultural heritage of sedentary lifestyle, he dismissed travel as "abnormal", "irregular", and "extraordinary" in Chinese cultural context, without taking consideration different types of travel activities and extensive philosophical, moral and ideological implications attached to each kind.

The earlier interpretations of travel by the classical philosophers, and later reinforced by the imperial, literati and individual travelers have had profound influence on the production of different types of travel in imperial China, and the motives such as ruling stability, self-cultivation and spiritual revival were manifest in the earlier travel activities undertaken by emperors, officials and literati.

As early as the Zhou dynasty (r. 1023-983B.C.), The Book of Documents (*Shu Jing*) recorded ritualized tours of the ancient sage-king Shun (Strassberg 1994: 12). Strassberg argued that the early travels of emperors aimed at "ordering the political, spiritual, and material dimensions of the world and to provide a guide for later rulers" (1994: 12). An emperor was able

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to demonstrate his control and authority over the ruled territory by touring his realm, visiting mountains and rivers, and performing rites to heaven and earth at sacred peaks. Documented imperial travels can be seen as pre-Buddhist pilgrimage-like activity. These travel itineraries were primarily internal, and touring one's own landscape, from the very beginning, was a discursive practice that fueled journeys and landscapes with symbolic meaning and significance, hence the inscribed landscapes as vividly captured by Strassberg. The tradition of inscribing landscape with symbolic meaning was also reflected in the rhetorical and pedagogical features so pervasive in the earlier travel writing by Chinese literati.

Mountains and water were two important metaphors in Chinese literati travel writings, whose origin can be traced back to the philosophical teachings of Confucianism and Daoism. The *Mencius* (*Meng Zi*) recorded that when Confucius climbed to the top of the Supreme Mountain (*Tai shan*), the empire appeared insignifican. For Chinese travel writers, the motif of ascension of mountains or other high points became especially pervasive as, compared to more grounded travel, ascents and heights were widely believed to offer the "grand view" symbolic of an all-encompassing view of reality (Strassberg 1994: 21). In contrast to the scenic panoramas offered by the heights of mountains, water, on the other hand, provided an image of free and easy wandering advocated in Daoism. In a number of fables, tropes of floating on the wind or down a river were used to illustrate man's natural and effortless participation in the Dao (Strassberg 1994: 22). The very concept of landscape, *shan-shui*, literally, mountains and water, thus inspired many later works of lyrical travel literature in which travelers sought to inscribe the inner feeling (*qing*) with the sensual qualities of scenes (*jing*), to incorporate individual poetic vision within a narrative framework derived from moral, philosophical and historiographical

discourses, and to capture the momentary experiences of self-realization in descriptions of landscapes.

One result of this emphasis on spatial symbolization is the remarkable negligence in the earlier travel writings of the actual journey to a place in terms of rigors of the road, travel motivation, traveling companions and individuals met on the road, and social events, as occur in many Western narratives. It was with the rise of a new kind of *shi* poetry – subjective and private genre in the literary culture, along with the prevalence of Buddhist forms of pilgrimages during the Six Dynasties (220 – 589) that new types of travel and new lyrical impulse emerged, both of which stressed personal experience, detachment from the political world and a sense of realism. While earlier journeys were often undertaken by literati to visit teachers and friends, to lobby the courts and advocate political agendas, or to take up official posts somewhere far away from home, the Six Dynasties period saw large mass migrations of ordinary people due to such sociopolitical factors such as the fragmentation of the empire, rise of regional power centers and the popularity of Buddhism. This resulted in the development of new travel destinations including the ancient metropolises and new religious sites patronized by lay pilgrims.

By the end of the Six Dynasties, cities like Changan and Luoyang had already become the populous destinations alternative to natural landscapes for both literati and urban dwellers, along with the development of a variety of occupations and services facilitating leisure trips to these cities. Chinese ancient urban tourism reached its climax in the Tang Dynasty, when the contemporary capital city, Changan, received considerable numbers of travelers ranging from merchants, literati, pilgrims, sightseers, to foreign visitors, delegations, and foreign students (Wang 2002). Many cities in the Song Dynasty already provided sedan chair rental service to tourists, and compiled the earliest guide maps – *dijing*, *the scripture of places* (地经), not to

mention highly developed restaurant and hotel businesses. Urban tourism aside, the prevalence of Buddhism resulted in the emergence of new sacred sites – sites of monasteries, Buddhist images and great Buddhist Mountains,[4] to which lay pilgrims often traveled in large groups. These journeys contrasted sharply with the literati travel regarding the scale of participation, the voluntary nature, the grassroots initiatives and individualistic pursuit of personal goals and welfare. Below, more will be discussed about pilgrimages of lay people and its significance in nurturing voluntary associations and negotiating the hegemonic meanings mapped onto the landscape by the official discourses.

Urban tourism took on a new twist at the demise of the Qing Dynasty, with the burgeoning of Western style leisure activities in the forms of park, cinema, night club and so on. The declaration of a Republic in 1912 broke the linkage with previous imperial pilgrimages, literati journeys to the "mountains and water", and saw the rise of modern mass tourism, beginning with the opening of the first travel agency – China Travel Agency (CTA) – in Shanghai in 1927. Attached with Shanghai Bank, CTA started by selling train tickets, gradually expanded its business to incorporate investing in tourism facilities, selling packaged tours, issuing travelers' checks, publishing travel magazines, and even assisting study abroad applications (Zheng 1996). In addition to the formally organized leisure tours by CTA, there were a variety of types of group travels that accompanied the outbreak of wars and constant shifts of local powers. Before the Pacific War broke out in 1941, heritage tourism that allowed

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[4] The famous sites of Buddhist images include stone caves at Tun-huang, Yun-kang, Lung-men, and Ta-tsu. The four great Buddhist Mountains are Wu-tai, Omei, Pu-tuo and Chiu-hua, situated at the four imaginary cardinal points of the Chinese empire and at the same time representing the four constitutive elements of the universe (Naquin and Yu 1992: 16).

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ordinary people to visit the sites immortalized by imperial emperors, poets and artists was predominant. Group tours were popular as travelers not only joined packaged tours but also organized voluntary groups among friends, classmates and co-workers (Jia 2004). The Pacific War provided new opportunities to travel into the country's internal areas and frontiers as large numbers of official departments, universities and factories moved to the Southwest and Northwest and stirred people to use travel as a means to propagandize ideas of national salvation and mobilize anti-Japanese activities (Jia 2004: 86).

The burgeoning of modern tourism in the Republic era did not continue into the latter half of the 1940s, and for the three and a half decades of Mao's regime, both traditional culture and freedom to travel were suppressed (Sofield and Li 1998). With its inherent connection with tradition, imperial heritage and the cultural past as a whole, leisure travel was severely restricted and disciplined and leisure tourism was effectively absent from people's everyday lives and vocabularies (Nyiri 2006). The geographic immobility of the Chinese population was a result of a peculiar set of politico-economic conditions during a given historical period. As Yang points out, the Household Registration (*hukou*) system implemented in the 1950s not only minimized chances for privately-initiated migration, but also served to bind large sectors of the population permanently to their places of work or birth. In addition, transportation costs rendered the option of tourism less than practical (Yang 2000: 391, 392).

It was not until the advent of Deng Xiaoping's modernization reforms in 1978 that these trends reversed, and tourism was once again accepted for its potential to boost the economy. Heritage tourism, along with conservation and presentation of traditional culture, was promoted while landscape and sites began to take on new symbolic meanings and significance, as will be addressed in the next section. While travel traditions in imperial times were framed by classical

Confucian and Daoist philosophies and undertaken by individuals motivated by a number of aspirations to pursue various goals, contemporary Chinese tourism was largely initiated by the State, and involved a conscious decision by the government that travelers should be guided, educated and disciplined by such institutions as work units, schools, the National Tourism Administration, travel agencies and so on.

1.1.2 Travel and the State

Domestic tourism took off after Deng Xiaoping gave his talks in 1978 and 1979 stressing the significant role of developing tourism as a newly emerged industry in opening up to the outside world and stimulating the domestic economy (Zhang and Xie 2005). On the one hand, the state began to promote domestic tourism as a remedy to the slackened domestic consumption and economic growth. On the other hand, the state promoted heritage tourism to promote a sense of nationalism and modernization, charting the landscape of China with a number of holy sites and places associated with revolutionary activities or revolutionary leaders (Wagner 1992). In so doing, the state successfully transformed Chinese geography that used to be ruled by emperors and deities into a new territory charted by the Communist Party.

Many scholars have noted the significant role of the state in the development of domestic tourism in post-socialist China. On his trip to an ethnic minority region of southwest China accompanied by official Han Chinese cadres, Stevan Harrell (1995) describes how his gaze was continually structured and circumscribed by his hosts and their conception of the Chinese nation in the reform era. He was told where he should stop and take a look, where to take photos, what to appreciate and, of course, what he should not look at and not photograph. In his study of

tourism and modernity in Guizhou Province, Tim Oakes (1997) points out that the Chinese state has increasingly represented and visualized its ethnic minorities as symbolic markers of ethnic, traditional and authentic other to be gazed upon by "modern" Chinese. The tourist gaze is also reflected by the state's construction and representation of certain 'scenic spots' (*jing dian*). In 1982, the state launched a project to map the significance onto various landscapes and ranked them as the Key Scenic Areas at the National and Provincial levels, many of which served as the sites of "patriotic education" (Nyíri 2006: 15). While travel in imperial China appropriated travel as a way to transform nature into embodied and inscribed landscapes, the contemporary Chinese state has successfully transformed Chinese geography that used to be ruled by emperors and deities into a new territory charted with national symbols and significance.

Another body of scholarship on tourism and the state stresses how the state constructs nationhood and modernity through the development of ethnic tourism. Swain argues that due to the long history of conflict and negotiation between ethnic minority groups and the state, ethnic tourism only "reinforces their separateness from the majority while integrating them into the state economy" (1990: 29). For Swain, ethnic tourism is used economically by the state to boost consumerism and bring in foreign currencies. In addition to Swain's economically based approach, some scholars propose that China's packaging and production of a minority commodity in tourism is a consequence of the state's attempts to build nationhood and modernity (Gladney 1994, 1998, 2004; Schein 1997, 2000; Litzinger 2000). Gladney, for instance, argues that the commodification of minorities in ethnic tourism is something more than a response to cosmopolitan consumerism. Rather it provides the state with "important symbolic capital" that is central to its nationalization and modernization project (1994: 95).

In a similar vein, Louisa Schein further emphasizes this point by introducing the concept of "internal Orientalism" (see 1997, 2000). She observes how the obsession to represent minorities as opposed to Han resulted from an era of identity crisis that is linked to a desire for modernity and a desire to maintain continuity with a traditional past. This has been accompanied by an intense inquiry into Chinese national culture and identity. In this sense, Schein adopts the phrase "internal Orientalism" to describe the relationship between imagining and cultural domination of minorities that takes place within China (1997: 70). The internal Other, in the form of the ethnic minorities, "came to represent the hope for recovery of a self weakened and threatened at the center…[and] at the same time were (selectively) appropriated and valorized as elements of Chinese culture" (Schein 1997:70).

The anxiety over this contradiction is vividly displayed by the popularity of Shenzhen's "Splendid China" (*Jinxiu Zhonghua*) and "China Folk Culture villages" (*Zhongguo minzu wenhua cun*) tourist parks (Anagnost 1997; Oakes 1997). Anagnost notes that the most intriguing thing about "Splendid China" is that this miniaturized landscape of ancient Chinese cultural traditions is positioned within the most modern and transient of all Chinese cities, Shenzhen. The juxtaposition is a compelling expression of how tourism and commodification collaborate to evoke a sense of nostalgia upon which to build a sense of national identity. "China Folk Culture Villages" Tourist Park was opened next door to "Splendid China" shortly after the latter's opening. The park boasts the "authentic replicas" of dwellings and customs of twenty-one officially recognized nationalities guided by the principle of "discarding the dross and selecting the essential." Oakes writes that "the touristic vision of the Chinese nation…is of a poetic and colorful mosaic, a distinctive tapestry woven by the happy and servile minorities", hence

"modern China's identity [is] resting squarely upon the shoulders of its ethnic minorities" (Oakes 1997: 39, 40).

1.1.3   Travel, Voluntary Associations and Counter-Hegemonic Practices

So far, I have discussed the multiple dimensions of the cultural meanings of travel in imperial and modern China, emphasizing the role of the state in defining, interpreting, and making spaces, and fueling travel with embodied meanings and significance to actualize certain philosophical, political, and religious ideals. Travel, "*you*" in the Chinese cultural context, encompassed a whole array of activities: enjoying natural beauty, investigating history, reflecting upon the past, making contact with deities, and paying tribute to mountains and water (Naquin and Yu 1992: 18). The moments of traveling were often immortalized in poems, paintings, or short essays. Despite the copious travel writings and records of travel activities in the history of China, travel did not occupy the same central position in Chinese culture that it did in the West, and traveling was conceived by Chinese as contingent and anomalous compared to the norm of residing in one place. The marginalized position of travel in Chinese culture might tempt one, like Fei Xiaotong, to assume that Chinese people tended to be immobile, and if they traveled, they must have been forced to do so due to such malevolent conditions as political chaos, natural disasters and the shift of official appointment. However, this assumption would overlook the evidence of a variety of voluntary travel activities that sprang from grassroots initiatives of ordinary people in the past and today. By taking short or long term journeys with diverse expectations, interests, and preoccupations in order to fulfill different goals and personal agendas, travelers were able to appropriate and negotiate the hegemonic meanings of travel and place that are defined and regulated by the state and elite classes. In addition, travel activities were often organized around

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voluntary ties among like-minded people who shared common goals and interests, and thus fostered horizontal relationships in a centralized and hierarchical society.

1.1.3.1 Incense Association and Pilgrimage to Miao-feng Shan

Susan Naquin (1992) has studied the pilgrimage associations that since the 17th century had regularly visited the Miao-feng Shan, Mountain of the Marvelous Peak, located forty kilometers northwest of Peking, to pay tribute and worship the Goddess of Green Clouds (the Goddess, *bixia yuanjun*). The temple to the Goddess on Miao-feng Shan was built in the mid-seventeenth century, and in the next century became the most popular destination for the Peking pilgrims, and important occasions for the temple fairs and festive celebrations (Naquin 1992: 338). The growing fame of the mountain temple was a cause, as well as a result, of the emergence of large numbers of pilgrimage associations, or literally incense associations (*xiang hui*). Not only did these associations raise the money to build the temple, but also they were engaged in a variety of public demonstrations and performances during the pilgrimage season. Spontaneously started by people from the same neighborhood or village near the mountain, the pilgrimage increasingly attracted entertainers and occupational groups, whose members were commonly recruited from the lower class, represented by a heterogeneous assembly of occupations such as iron-workers, tinkers, pawnshop owners, actors, shoemakers, porters and so on (Naquin 1992, Zhang 2001, Wu 1998a). They formed various incense associations based on the types of occupation and services they contributed en route to the temple. Each association selected its own head or deputy, money manager, tea supervisor, treasurer, cook, carter, and the like. The association that was responsible for a specialized task during the pilgrimage was often named after its assignment: the Venerable Association for Donating Flowers, the Religious

Association for Providing Tea Leaves, the Tailor's association for Fixing Broke Shoes of Pilgrims, and so forth (Naquin 1992: 340; Wu 1998a: 50).

Every year in the early spring, members of the associations would post large paper announcements all around the city, inviting people to sign up and make the journey. The journey to the temple was by no means an easy stroll given the location of the mountain on the far edge of the Peking city; it took a day and half to reach the foothills and to walk from the foothill to the temple on the southern spur of the mountain. Despite the hardship and time- and money-consuming preparations made before the trips, pilgrimage to Miao-feng Shan was a dramatic pageant of the life of the common people and a triumphant celebration of their beliefs, joy and hopes through voluntary association and massive cooperation. By taking the journeys to the mountain temple, the travelers consciously or unconsciously, celebrated a symbolic transgression of the imperial sovereignty and understanding of landscapes, cults, and social and spatial hierarchies.

The cult of the Goddess of Green Clouds was, from the outset, voluntarily developed from grassroots initiatives. As the Goddess was identified as the daughter of the God of Mount Tai, the venerable Eastern Peak (*dong yue*), it was closely linked to the imperial worship to Mount Tai. From early times, the God of the Eastern Peak had been worshiped by sovereigns to assert the legitimacy of a new dynasty or to consolidate imperial power (Wu 1992). As he was part of the official pantheon, empirewide patronage of this male, awe-inspiring god was often carried out when a new emperor ascended the throne. The Goddess of Green Clouds, by contrast, was well known as a fertility goddess, personified as an "earth mother" with loving, compassionate, and merciful character. Compared with her fearful father, the Goddess seemed more relevant to ordinary people's life with her legendary power to cure all kinds of diseases and

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her ability to grant children, especially sons, to infertile women. As a consequence, these two cults, father and daughter, represented a polarized pattern in which the center authority appealed to the God of Mount Tai for the ruling legitimacy, while the masses flocked to the Goddess for a prosperous and abundant life blessed with good health, good harvest, successful business, and of course, giving birth to sons.

Pilgrimage to Miao-feng Shan in the Peking area was apparently fueled by the above-mentioned grassroots initiatives outside the imperial framework. Other temples to the Sovereign of the Goddess existed, like the one located on Ya-chi Shan, a mountain eighty kilometers east of Peking. Because Ya-chi Shan temple was located on the way to well-travelled imperial routes to Qing tombs and summer hunting grounds, it received patronage primarily from the high officials and royal family members of the capital. Therefore, Ya-chi Shan came to be known for its "rich pilgrims" (*fu xiang* 富香), while Miao-feng Shan, receiving pilgrimage associations of the low status people, was better known for its "poor pilgrims" (*ku xiang* 穷香) (Naquin 1992: 351). These pilgrimage associations intentionally sought out Miao-feng Mountain as a place far enough away from the center and paths of the imperial power and surveillance, so that they could create a particular spatial-temporal dimension to engage in a variety of voluntary activities. Throughout the annual pilgrimage season, the masses formed various incense associations, recruited members, raised funds, assigned duties and prepared offerings; when visiting the mountain, each group engaged in either entertaining performances, or professional services like donating tea leaves, preparing incense, fixing shoes, or cooking porridge. All these associations agreed upon and followed a set of specific principles and ethics to earn enough "face" and gain

respect from fellow associations and pilgrims.[5] For example, one of the previous heads of the "Lion Dance Venerable Association" was the best lion dance performer in the Peking city, and his reputation earned from the journey to Miao-feng Shan was so well recognized that incense associations would not pass his house or even the street on which he lived without stopping the drum and performing the formal salute three times in a row in front of his doorway (Wu 1998b).

For centuries, the central governments of China had attempted to hold the authority and power to define what was to be considered sacred and holy. The state viewed the large scale of pilgrimages of ordinary people as a problem of social order. The first Qing emperor once articulated such concerns when he declared that, "the capital is an important area. We must immediately prohibit those who use the excuse of offering incense to unfurl banners and bang gongs, for this permits men and women to mix together and makes noise that fills up the alleys and lanes as [people] act brazenly in public" (cited in Naquin 1992: 352). Despite state hostility, the pilgrimage to Miao-feng Shan maintained its growth and prosperity until the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 when people's lives were radically interrupted by both external and internal chaos.

The significance of incense associations and their annual journeys to Miao-feng Shan are thus underlined by their grassroots and voluntary activities that took place outside an imperial framework and the horizontal ties that were established among ordinary people from a wide range of social classes, as well as the symbolic transgression of the very act of traveling to the pilgrimage site far away from the imperial center. By creating their own sacred sites and engaging in voluntary pilgrimage activities, the common people, mainly from the suppressed

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[5] Some examples of these principles are being generous, throwing luxurious banquets, prohibiting meat and alcohol, not pushing and shoving or being noisy or frivolous, etc.

class in this case, retained their dignity and freedom as hosts and hostesses of the festivals, and redistributed social wealth, power and hierarchies in their own way.

1.1.3.2 Students Associations and the *Da Chuan-lian*

Another example of large scale mobility and massive mobilization of the common people occurred in the "Great Linkup" (*Dachuanlian*) movement during the Cultural Revolution (1976 – 77). The Movement was first initiated by a group of high school students who denounced the school authorities, quit school, and took a journey to Beijing. It officially began on August 31, 1966, when Mao Zedong received these students for the second time. After that, students swarmed into Beijing from different regions of the country in hope of being received by Mao. On September 15 1996, the state further promoted the linkup by allowing the students to ride the trains free of charge, and allowing them to have their living expenses reimbursed by the state. Millions of students took journeys around the country, spreading the word of Mao's thoughts on the way, learning about the revolutionary experiences of the villagers, and visiting distant-neighboring schools and revolutionary sites; hence the beginning of nationwide interschool and intercity linkup (Wagner 1992: 380).

The students were encouraged to exchange revolutionary experiences and ignite the revolutionary spirit in the every corner of the country (*Renmin Ribao*, September 1, 1966, cited in Yang 2000). By December 1966, millions of Chinese youths formed voluntary linkup teams and carried out this pilgrimage activity by visiting Peking and other revolutionary sites in order to imbue themselves with revolutionary spirit and link up with other revolutionary youth. Transportation, food and lodging were to be provided and expenses covered by the state on the linkup trips (Jiang 1994). Initially students traveled by train, but in October 1966 traveling on foot was encouraged, not only because of the chaos of transportation and other logistical

problems caused by the massive flow of large numbers of travelers, but also because the government began to feel anxiety toward the wide ranging horizontal communication of students and large scale mobility of the common people which resulted from the Linkup. In 1996, official notices were issued on October 29, November 16, and December 1 to urge a temporary stop to the Great Linkup, but the movement did not stop until March 1967 when another notice was issued by the state to call it off (Yang 2000: 389).

During the movement, some people traveled to the remote countryside and reached frontier regions to worship the "holy sites of revolution", and some visited Beijing in hope of seeing Mao. According to reference data, there were over 2 million who went to Beijing University for linkup, and 900,000 who visited Jianggang Mountain, one of the "holy sites of revolution" in August 1966 alone (cited in Yang 2000). At first glance, the Linkup Movement corresponded to the official objective to transform the territory of China into a sacred landscape of revolution and to turn the travelers into political propagandists. However, there are latent contradictions between the state's objective and the personal initiatives and impacts of traveling experiences on individuals.

While many students indeed proclaimed that they became wiser and nobler after traveling to Beijing and other revolutionary sites around the country (*Peking Review*, January 1, 1967, cited in Yang 2000), exactly how they emerged from such journeys "wiser and nobler" must be closely examined. As Yang pointed out, the Linkup Movement did not so much transform the participants into revolutionary fighters as lead them to doubt and interrogate their self-identity and their religious belief in the Party and Mao (2006). The Linkup Movement, from the outset, was completely new to the young students outside of the capital. To many who were in their teens and understood little about the political significance of this Movement, the Linkup merely

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provided an unprecedented opportunity to travel to the capital free of charge. There was an undeniable seriousness in carrying out the revolution, but a fascination with tourism was also strong and manifest. Those from the south were particularly excited because they could see the real snow for the first time, and some expected to taste the famous Peking duck.[6] During the Linkup Movement, many young people traveled to the rural or remote territories of China, and began to see the backwardness and poverty of Chinese society, which were strikingly different from the descriptions in their school textbooks. For example, a young student traveling from Beijing to Wuhan expressed his sympathy toward the life of porters by the riverside of the Chang Jiang (Long River):

"I saw how the porters carried the baskets of coal onto the boat yesterday. They had no machines to help them, but used only their hands to carry the baskets. Two porters carried one huge basket of coal that weighted nearly two hundred *jin* (100kg). Their faces were all soaked in the sweat. I felt deep sympathy toward the hard life they had to take. I could not explain the stir felt in my heart…" (Liu 1996:50)

Many of them also gained a new understanding of who "the People" (*ren min*) were from their first hand experiences with workers and peasants. "The People" had been used discursively by the state as the opposite of "the Enemy," the term that was widely used in slogans and media propaganda. For many students, "the People" was only an abstract concept and political slogan. Not until they visited the large rural areas of China, did they first realize "the People" were real human beings with flesh and blood; there were not as many "enemies" hidden in "the people" as they had been cautioned against. "The people" were poor but hardworking and warm-hearted,

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[6] Wu, Guo, "Archives of the Red Guards" published on the Internet: http://www.china-linguist.com/ebook/029redguard/index.html

"the people" had weaknesses as well as strengths, and "the people" were capable of expressing love and hatred, too (Yang 2006).

As something never imagined before, the experience of traveling across the country, visiting new places and meeting new people served as a rite-of-passage for these coming-of-age youth, transporting them from their familiar surroundings into a state of unprecedented mobility. This mobility let them experience a profound sense of freedom, emancipation, and egalitarianism within members of the age-cohorts. As the reality of life unfolded before their eyes on the road, they inevitably experienced the disillusionment of a legendary future portrayed by the socialist state and its charismatic leaders, which sometimes led to mental confusion but most of the time led to new insights of and reflections upon their utopian vision of the future, identification as "revolutionary vanguards" and corresponding "revolutionary" behaviors. As Yang argued, this socialist patriotism accompanied by a romantic vision about the future supplied the mainstay of the self-identity of Chinese youth before the Linkup Movement (Yang 2000: 391),

In addition to being an identity-transforming experience, the Linkup Movement, like the Miao-feng Shan pilgrimages of the 17th and 18th centuries, provided sites for the formation of voluntary associations and horizontal ties among travelers. These sorts of ties from the Linkup Movement have been maintained until today. In his study of the nostalgia exhibited by *zhiqing* (the educated youth) who participated in the Linkup and the subsequent "Up to the Mountain and Down to the Village" movement (*shangshan xiaxiang*), Yang (2003) notes that the youth of yesterday tried to rebuild previous connections by organizing "homecoming" trips to the villages or farms where they had spent their young adulthood, arranging gatherings, reunion dinners, and setting up zhiqing websites. To them, the "revolutionary" sites that they visited with fervent

enthusiasm decades earlier are, today, remembered as significant because they commemorate their youth, love and friendship of the past days.

1.2   DONKEY FRIEND TRAVEL AND VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS OF TRAVELERS

The cases of Miao-feng Shan pilgrimage in imperial times and the Linkup Movement in the Maoist era not only provide examples of the role of the state in defining and regulating the mobility of people and significances of places, but also of individuals' initiatives, traveling practices, motivations and goals achieved by creating their own sacred sites, forming voluntary associations, striking up friendships, sidestepping state ideologies and reflecting on their journeys. In so doing, the hegemonic meaning of travel and places can be appropriated and challenged. As both cases have showed, geographical and social mobility resulted from travel with like-minded people inevitably gave rise to transgressions from the state sovereignty over space and hierarchy. This was one of the reasons why both the imperial and socialist states were so anxious as to call off these spontaneous, cross-border and sometimes festive activities carried out by individuals and associations.

It is against this socio-historical background that this research of the Chinese backpackers, or donkey friends, is significant. Stimulated by spontaneous initiatives and organized by grassroots communities, donkey friends bear noticeable resemblance with the pilgrimage activity and Linkup movement of the past. First of all, they share the common characteristic of pilgrimage as travel is often involved in a liminal condition entailing suspension of normal structural constrains, characterized by freedom, egalitarianism, communion, and

creativity (Turner 1995: 96). Being relieved of daily routines, established social norms and social relations, travelers enter a brand new environment where irrational or transgressive behaviors were not uncommon. One example is the unusual trust formed on the road that accompanies the fellowship of travelers. The narratives of former students participating in the Great Linkup attest to the trust and strong feelings of fellowship among travelers. For instance, some wrote: "within half a day we began to encounter other … teams… we struck up an instant camaraderie, singing songs together, encouraging each other, exchanging information about what lay ahead." Some wrote with deep nostalgia: "Afterwards I [will] never forget that once upon a time on winding mountain roads tens of thousands of Red Guards walked to the north, sharing a dream. On this road, strangers were not strangers. People truly cared about one another" (cited in Yang 2000: 394). This strong sense of communion is manifest in the Linkup Movement and it is not unfamiliar to those engaged in the Miao-feng Shan pilgrimage or the donkey friends traveling in voluntarily formed groups.

Secondly, despite its liminal and marginalized position in the Chinese society, the new mobility experienced by ordinary people, facilitated by pilgrimage, social mobility and tourism, nevertheless produced genuine and concrete effects on travelers as well as immediate and long-term influence on the larger sociopolitical conditions. As Yang argued, the influences of the Great Linkup are both deep and complex, in that it transformed a generation of people, and simultaneously affected subsequent social movements (*shehui yundong*) in China (2000: 395). With traveling as their central component, Miao-feng Shan pilgrims created a real world outside the imperial framework, with its widely acknowledged rules and principles, new hierarchical system predicated on these rules, and the reputation and respect that were earned from the journey but carried on into everyday lives. Similarly, rather than entailing a temporary and

transitory experience, donkey friend travel impacts travelers in long-term ways that require a detailed study of the social relationships, the process of self-transformation and collective actions involved before, during and after a journey. These impacts will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

The third characteristic shared by these travel practices is correlated with the first two. As the strong fellowship is formed and space, class and social norms are transgressed, both the imperial and socialist states were unsympathetic towards personal mobility, especially if they involved large groups of men and women and covered broad geographical regions (see Naquin 1992; Wagner 1992). The horizontal and direct ties among the migrating subjects have long been viewed as deleterious to the stability of the rule and vertical relationship between the state and its subjects. Hence travel practices, far from a straightforward human activity, entailed a variety of very different expectations, interests, contentions and complications. The relationship between the Chinese state and its mobile subjects is ambivalent because on the one hand, the state needs to adjust itself to the increasingly globalized world in which travel, migration, and constant movement dominate global trade and industry, and on the other hand, movement of people and things also serves to create new types of subjectivities, new citizenship and new sorts of social networks that the state finds difficult to control. From this vantage point, this study of Chinese donkey friend tourism will provide a more thorough understanding of the development of new forms of governmentality, new subjectivities and social networks, contentions and negotiations between the state and its mobile subjects.

1.2.1 Rise of Donkey Friend Tourism

1.2.1.1 The Promotion

In 1995, the Chinese government launched the "Golden Weeks" (*huangjin zhou*) holidays, creating three weeks off around the October 1 (National Day), May 1 (Labor Day) and during the lunar new year Spring Festival. The introduction of these long holidays has resulted in a "revolution in Chinese leisure" (Nyíri 2006: 6), which is manifest in a number of ways ranging from lifestyles and consumption styles to world views. It is not unusual to hear such declarations as "work hard and play hard," "work is a means of traveling," "spend all the money on the road," and so on. The role of the state in encouraging travel and consumption is further underscored by a series of meetings held on tourism development by the national and provincial tourism administrations. The government has also invested in a number of festivals and theme parks, as well as in the creation and recreation of dozens of "old towns" (*gu zhen*) in rural China. Travel has today become an indispensible part of leisure life and a major area of consumption in urban China. A hasty glimpse at any newsstand or book stall illustrates the importance of travel in the everyday lives of the urban population. There are dozens of magazines, newspapers, guidebooks and collections of travelogues that advise people where to go on holiday. There are brochures and flyers from competing travel agencies, and a large number of travel websites and forums that provide the most up-to-date information, the most off-the-beaten-path destinations, and opportunities to travel with like-minded people. According to the latest statistics, 146 million people left home to travel during the 2006 Labor Day holidays, an increase of 20 percent from the previous year. The average expenditure per tourist was 401 Yuan (equivalent to 60 US dollars) (*The Morning Post*, May 8, 2006), while in Beijing the monthly salary was 580 Yuan.

The minimum average spent on travel in 2006 was 2700. The figures mean that on average each traveler spent one sixth or more of his / her monthly salary on travel in one holiday.
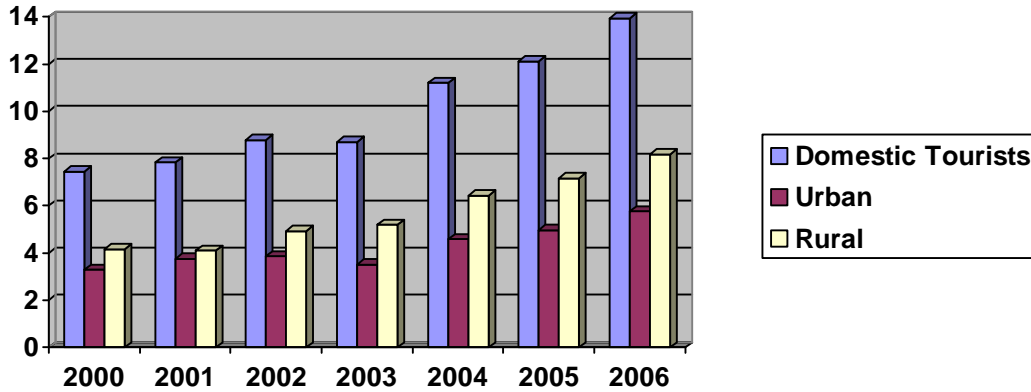
**Figure 1 No. of domestic tourists 2000 - 2006: unit 100 million persons**
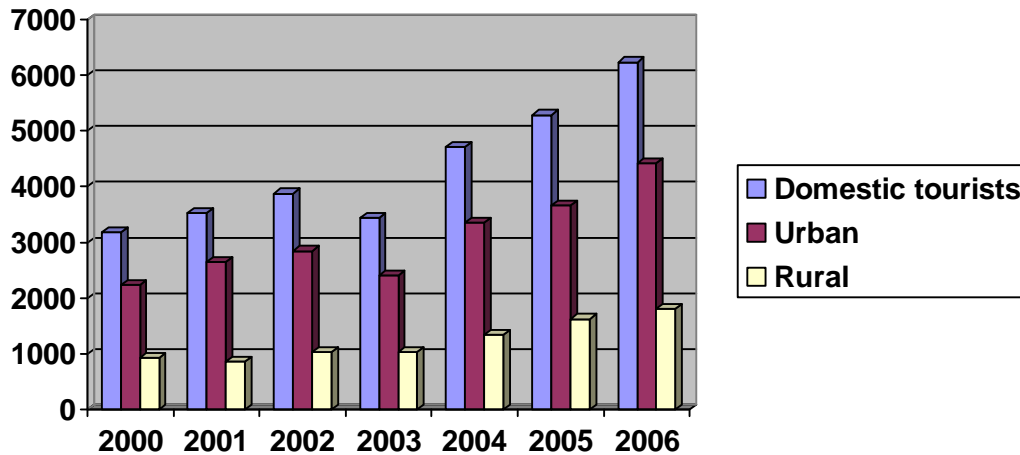
Figure 2 Annual Domestic Tourist Expenditure from 2000 - 2006 unit: 100 million Yuan

(Source: http://www.stats.gov.cn)

1.2.1.2 The Internet

The emergence and popularity of donkey friend groups cannot be separated from the development of the Internet and the proliferation of travel websites. The Internet has provided

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Chinese urban youth with both the knowledge of outdoor activities and the opportunity to partner in self-organized trips. With the diffusion of the Internet, web-based donkey friend associations and virtual clubs flourished. Bulletin boards and community forums are places where donkey friends initiate trips, locate travel companions, post travel stories, and socialize. The Internet has fueled a deterritorialized imagination and created a time-space compression that brings about the experiences that James Clifford has called "traveling-in-dwelling" and "dwelling-in-traveling" (1997: 36).

At home, donkey friends use the World Wide Web to search for information and opinions about tickets, routes and destinations. Travelers revisit destinations by writing travelogues not only recording their itineraries but also sharing their personal feelings, sensational stories, memorable moments, and sometimes their descriptions of team members. Reading these stories on the Web gives those who have returned home a sense of a virtual travel experience that blurs the boundary between here and there, between now and then. For travelers on the road, the impact of Internet use on travel experiences is even more profound. Internet cafes abound at every donkey friend destination. They can be found in areas as remote as Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. Donkey friends use them to check emails, browse news websites, and post travel stories on their blogs or public Internet forums. The Internet creates close ties with family, friends, and help to make the travel destinations more of a home away from home.

In addition to the practical uses of the Internet for information and communication, the Internet also facilitates new social spaces and social ties for Chinese donkey friends. Before the existence of the Internet, those who took part in backpacker tourism and outdoor activities were usually professional or semi-professional athletes, members of official sports and climbing associations, and outdoor equipment retailers. Sanfo, a major retail chain of outdoor-gear with

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headquarters in Beijing, started to organize travel and outdoor activities as early as in 1996, but information only spread by word-of-mouth within private circles. There were other groups or individuals engaged in backpacker travel and outdoor activity, but they were scattered and mostly unaware of the existence of similar groups. Radical change came along as the Internet developed rapidly in urban China since the late 1990s. In 1999 and 2000, Travel Forum at Sina.com and Lvye (Green Wilderness) Outdoor Club at Lvye.org were established. Their founders were active participants in previous private travelers' circles. Since then, travel websites and Internet forums have flourished. The size of these online communities varies. Lvye website had more than 100,000 registered users by the end of 2004 and received more than 10,000 hits per day. Smaller sites like the Internet forum of the Travel and Photography Club, one that I joined, had around 1,000 registered members in 2005 and it received far fewer hits per day.

The emergence of these outdoor websites and Internet forums indicated the beginning of donkey friend tourism in urban China. Sina Travel Forum, for example, was the first Internet forum to allow travelers to post itineraries, personal stories and photos. By posting travelogues and reading those of others, a traveler discovered for the first time discovered a whole new world in which s/he was no longer alone but among a legion of people who shared the common ideas, values and goals. Like him / herself, they were eager to find friends in the same camp to exchange information and share experiences. Donkey friend tourism could not have emerged if not for the state's ardent promotion of the tourist industry. However, it would never have gone beyond the private circles and have become a nationwide fashion trend if not for the prevalence of the Internet. The proliferation of travel websites and forums not only created the newly found leisure activity – backpacker travel – known to ordinary people outside the professional or semi-

professional circles, but also drew travel enthusiasts out of their private and isolated circles to form a larger community of like-minded people who might otherwise have been total strangers outside of this context. Sina Travel Forum was later called "donkeys' forum" and its members "donkey friends," hence the origin of the Chinese terms for "backpacker tourism" and "backpackers". While "donkeys' forum" remains at Sina.com today, the generic term "donkey friend" has come to refer to all backpacker travelers and outdoor enthusiasts, regardless which Internet forum/community he/she belongs to.

1.2.1.3 The Community

It would be difficult to overstate the profound impact of Internet use upon the development of donkey friend tourism. Its unique role in motivating people to travel and create a travelers' space reveals that both online interactions and offline touristic engagements constitute and complement donkey friend travel experiences. A donkey friend is not only a traveler and a backpacker, but also a netizen who signs up with an Internet travel website, participates in online discussions, posts travelogues, and socializes with fellow travelers not only on the road but on the Internet as well. In addition to information exchange, the online activities of donkey friends include organizing trips, discussing certain scenic spots, publishing photos, discussing travel related issues, writing essays about the journey and companions, and so on. All these activities help a traveler establish fellowship with other donkey friends, and simultaneously build up his or her reputation within the circle of donkey friends. As will be discussed in chapter 2, it is clear that online activities, no less than companionship on the road, are an integral part of being a donkey friend.

The proliferation of donkey friend communities must be understood with a sociopolitical context in which the state increasingly withdrew from many public realms of social life and thus

allowed ordinary people, especially urban youth, to seek resources and networks beyond family, school and work unit to form associations and communities. Many of these communities are apolitical and interest-based; nevertheless they have nurtured new types of solidarity and horizontal ties that challenge the vertical relationships between state and society.

Since the 1990s, large numbers of new types of social groups and organizations have sprouted like bamboo after the rain (White et al. 1996). In their study of the changes in social organization in contemporary China, White et al categorize four layers of social organization according to the nature of their relationship with the state. The first category is what White et al call the "caged sector" including organizations that are subordinated to the state. The second is the "incorporated sector" including groups that are subject to varying degrees of governmental penetration. These two categories must be officially registered to carry on their activities. The third is called the "interstitial sector", or the "limbo" world of civil society. One dramatic example was the growth of the "salons" of intellectuals in 1988 - 9 that provided much of the thought and some of the organizational initiative behind the political mobilization of early 1989. But since the early 1990s, this type of informal association has taken a less explicitly political form. The fourth category is the "suppressed sector", or "underground civil society". This sphere consists of religious associations, ethnic groups, and democratic groups, which are subject to active repression or punitive surveillance (1996: 30-35).

Decades after the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989 there has been a rapid growth of urban associations that fall into the abovementioned third category. These associations usually bypass the complicated and time-consuming registration process by operating as informal groups, or registering as a business under the relevant industrial and commercial bureau, which requires a minimal management structure with a high degree of autonomy (Saich 2000). While

technically illegal, there are many "clubs," "social circles," "forums" and "salons" throughout China. In tandem with the diffusion of the Internet in the mid 1990s, online associations have flourished as this is the fastest and most convenient way to set up a community.[7]. As will be discussed in chapter 3, online associations are a new phenomenon on the Chinese urban scene. They operate through loosely established networks of like-minded people, accompanied by a flourish of cyberspace culture, entailing new kinds of social relationships, vocabularies and codes of behavior, and values and ethos.

Donkey friend communities are mainly based on the Internet. Some are registered as businesses such as outdoor gear shops or Internet cafés, but none are registered as a formal social organization under the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Due to their non-political nature and the fact that tourism that is consistent with the state development policy, donkey friend communities have been granted relatively free space, sometimes even extra support, to recruit new members and pursue their respective agendas. Political discussions do occur both online and in offline gatherings, which is not unusual in any social groups where free speech is allowed. However, the main topics of interest to donkey friends are still predominantly travel-centered.

This said, it is misleading if one considers the story of donkey friends straightforward and devoid of social and political significance. While earlier grassroots social organizations evolved in opposition to the state in either in the ambiguous "interstitial sector" or the illegal "underground sector" (White et al 1996), donkey friend communities enjoy political legitimacy because, as mentioned above, tourism development is part of the state's development policy. This does not mean that travelers' associations have no political significance or consequences.

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[7] An Internet user can set up a website under an independent domain name by simply registering online at the website of the Ministry of Information Industry (http://www.miibeian.gov.cn/).

By engaging in fellowship with like-minded people and practicing voluntary activities at the grassroots level, these travelers, in actuality, implement democratic values such as citizen participation, equal rights, and reasoned debates. In addition, the formation of community and horizontal ties serve as a potential reservoir for collective action. Other than in the forms of mass demonstration, rally or other dramatic confrontation with the government, the new repertoire is constructive, not disruptive, and is oriented towards promoting public consciousness, participation, information-sharing and cooperation. Simply put, newly-evolved social organizations like donkey friend communities, based on common interests and participation in certain leisure activities, no longer pose a direct threat to the authority, but aim to promote cultural change, change consumer behavior, and raise public awareness concerning specific social problems such as environmental damage, poverty, school drop-out rates, and the like. In chapter 6, I will discuss the roles that donkey friend communities have played in relation to social change, and in relation to broader cultural transitions that are taking place in China as a whole.

1.3   THE CHAPTERS

The following ethnographic and substantive arguments are developed in five core chapters. Chapter 2 describes the research methodology that I used to do fieldwork in conventional communities and in virtual communities on the Internet. I will introduce three donkey friend communities in which I conducted my fieldwork: Lvye (Green Wilderness) Outdoor Club (Lvye), Cherokee Team (the Team), and the Travel and Photography Club (the Club), all of which have a steady membership of donkey friends, and operate as grassroots associations

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facilitated by independent websites or online forums. By reflecting upon my field experience of gaining entry into these communities, and by examining the emergence of the communities in conjunction with the rapid expansion of Internet use, I aim to contribute to the challenges to dichotomies of real / virtual and online / offline. Despite the fact that the donkey friend tourism is largely a web-based phenomenon (Lim 2006), travelers' online identities and social relationship are often continued smoothly into everyday life interactions. Therefore both online socialization and offline encounters serve to create a strong sense of solidarity and a "community of sentiment" (Appadurai 1996).

Chapter 3 deals with the interpersonal relationships and social networks of donkey friend communities. China has long been recognized as a guanxi or "network" society. I argue that since China launched its economic reform in the early 1980s, the commodity economy in conjunction with the state's gradual retreat from many realms of social life has profoundly changed the patterns of how people socialize and interact. New forms of social organization which emerged outside of family, school, work units, and neighborhoods have nurtured new types of personal relationships, and new collective identities and subjectivities. This chapter will examine the idiosyncratic social relationships and networks that have emerged within donkey friend communities. In contrast to the negative image of the relationships evolved out of cyberspace and spontaneously initiated travel from Chinese popular and official discourses, donkey friends view their relationship as sincere, altruistic, and trustworthy, often in contrast with the "fake," "superficial," "instrumental" and *renqing* (human feeling) -embedded guanxi relationships they encounter in everyday lives. I will discuss the ethical, (non)-instrumental and aesthetic aspects of social relationships prevalent among donkey friends and discuss how they

come to form the above-mentioned "trusting" and "altruistic" relationships based on the common ethos, values and ideals of this particular form of travel.

In chapter 4, I examine the storytelling of travelers and interrogate the implications of the narratives in their construction and expression of personal and collective identities. Writing travel stories is one of the integral activities of being a donkey friend. These travel stories are not as simple as information exchange, but are often lyrical and poetic essays that cover topics ranging from the description of places to self-exposure of personal feelings and reflections. This chapter will examine how the tales from these travel writings as well as those told during the interviews enable a traveler to tell a story of him or herself, entailing the formation of new subjectivities and identities contextualized in the socioeconomic and political conditions of contemporary China.

Women travelers are the main focus of chapter 5. Being addressed as MM (meimei), or little sister, female donkey friends are the heroines on the road. In this chapter, I draw on the life stories of three female donkey friends, and let them speak in the first person about their travel experiences. The stories tell about their motivations, decision-making, goals, successes as well as failures. Through these stories they come to terms with who they are. In contrast to their male counterparts, female donkey friends are often suspicious of many outsiders and of their male partners. Even so, the three women donkey friends depicted in this chapter demonstrate the possibilities of an alternative kind of femininity in contemporary China, a female who is able to return the male gaze, take the initiative to claim her gender role and individuality, and to cast criticism on the feminine subject position in the overall urban setting of the Chinese society.

Chapter 6 explores the social and political potential of grassroots donkey friend communities to form a new urban public sphere and to engage in collective action. At first

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glance, travel and charity are seemingly unrelated. However it is not unusual for growing numbers of donkey friends to voluntarily organize charity sales and raise funds to help urban petitioners, or to sponsor the education of rural children, as part of their welfare projects. I argue that donkey friend associations and their collective actions signify the formation of new public space in urban China. The voluntary projects of these groups do not aim at changing the political agenda, but strive to prompt cultural change, to implement democratic values, and to raise public consciousness in relation to specific social problems such as environmental pollution, education, inequality, and poverty.

2.0   TRAVEL, CYBERSPACE AND VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

It was an ordinary weekend morning at 6:00 a.m.; birds had not given their first call and most people were still asleep. I found myself in an empty railway station with hardly anyone on the platform except a group of ten or so people who were dressed, like me, in flashy waterproof clothing and heavy walking boots, burdened by huge rucksacks with metal or plastic water bottles dangling from carabineers. I could barely see their faces in the dim light typical of this early hour of the morning, and I knew none of them by their real names. As the sky in the east began to turn pale and there were more noises coming from the street, a few more people joined the crowd and some struck up casual conversations.

This newly emerged urban scene is not unusual on weekends at the north and south Beijing railway stations, at long distance bus stations, and at service areas or toll stations of the expressway, all of which are the rendezvous spots for self-organized travelers, who either by foot or by vehicle, are heading to different destinations that can be as close as Beijing suburbs and as far as Tibet. Donkey friends at the railway and bus stations can be easily spotted by their clothing and worn equipment, both of which reflect the alternative features of the travel activities they embark on and distinguish them from tourist agency organized groups. Cars waiting at the toll stations and rest areas can also be singled out as belonging to a "travelers' team" by the identical stickers on the bodies of cars, CB radios and rooftop antennas for communication on the road, and thick bumpers necessary for the rough and dangerous road conditions to the "off-the-beaten-

track" destinations. The idiosyncratic character of the scene is not so much the emblematic ways in which these people dress themselves or decorate their cars, but the fact that it is the first time most of these people have seen one another. They have signed on to the same trip and will journey together as a group for one day to several weeks.

These donkey friends, or Chinese backpackers, look in many ways like Western backpackers. They are city dwellers who are fleeing from their everyday stress and routine and are heading for off-the-beaten places. These travelers try to avoid mass tourism seasons and destinations. They are preoccupied with budgeting and take pride in the ability to travel inexpensively. Many of them seek cultural authenticity and self-transformation during the journey. Moreover, the growing demand for backpacker travel has stimulated an industry dedicated to their needs, from youth hostels to the alternative guidebooks.

Despite the seeming similarities, donkey friends are different from backpackers in a number of ways. First of all, donkey friend tourism is, from the outset, a web-based phenomenon, as was discussed in the previous chapter. The popularity of travel websites and Internet forums (*lvyou luntan*) provided them with both the new channels to obtain travel information and the platform to seek like-minded people to travel together. Second, correlated with the first characteristic, donkey friend tourism is a group activity. Donkey friends like to travel in a group, and some avid travelers set up their own non-profit travel clubs to organize group trips, arrange reunion dinners and coordinate travelers' networks. Third, as language is often one of the markers of community, the presence of a unique vocabulary used and understood by donkey friends marks them out as a distinct cultural group in the Chinese urban scene. My own travel experience as a donkey friend bears out the features of this idiosyncratic travel style.

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2.1   THE TRIP

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, I was on the platform with twenty or so donkey friends, all in their hiking clothes and worn-out looking backpacks. In a few minutes, a train would arrive and take us to a small township on the border of Beijing and Hebei Province. Our destination – Cockcrow Post Town (*Jiming Yi*) – evolved from an old postal station that was first built in the Yuan Dynasty (1271 – 1368). It is located approximately 145 kilometers northwest of Beijing with approximately one hundred households. The town was well-known among donkey friends not only because it was old, and it was listed as one of one hundred most endangered sites in the world by the World Monuments Fund (WMF)[8], but for its massive rammed-earth-and-masonry town wall on which the popular movie "A Chinese Odyssey" (*Da Hua Xi You*) shot its outdoor scenes. Directed by Hong Kong comic actor/director Stephen Chow in 1995, the movie was such a success and iconoclastic classic for mainland people in their 20s and 30s, that the actors' lines were compiled into several books and became the catchwords and idioms that are still popular today. Closely tied to such popular culture, travel activities of donkey friends cannot be studied in isolation without taking the cultural context into consideration. While visiting the movie site was one inevitable part of the agenda, hiking was the other must-do. An eight-hour-trek along a river gorge was planned on the second day of the trip.

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[8] Cockcrow Post Town was listed as one of the one hundred most endangered sites in the world by the WMF in 2004 and 2006. More information can be found at the WMF website http://www.worldmonumentswatch.org/

2.1.1 Preparation

This was the first trip I participated in without the introduction of the "familiar people" (*shu ren*), for, curiously, none of my friends or classmates belonged to this travel club. Lvye ("green wilderness") Outdoor Club, or Lvye for short, is the earliest and most popular of the web-based travel organizations of the country. Initially set up as an online bulletin board in 1998 by a group of outdoor enthusiasts who were originally based in Beijing, Lvye has evolved into a large web-based community that typifies the co-evolution of the Internet and donkey friend communities in China. However, as its online forums attracted more hits everyday and the community recruited more members, the core members began to disagree about the core values of Lvye. Specifically, they debated whether the website and community should be operated commercially. Differences persisted; quarrels broke out on the Internet, and finally one of the core members moved the data to his personal server and established a new website, still called Lvye but under the different domain name. Today old Lvye.org and new Lvye.info operate as two independent websites, with the former insisting on non-profit principles while the latter began to make profits from advertisements, public fundraising and other commercial activities. Despite the split of two Lvyes, most donkey friends say that they do not really care about the differences, and they usually sign up with both groups and join whichever activities attract them. That was what I did.

I registered with both websites and adopted the same nickname (*ni cheng*) "donkey junior" (*xiao lv*) as I began to take on this new identity on the Internet. A registered user is eligible to edit his / her profile, post "message" (*tie zi*) and response "message", however, as the old Chinese saying goes, "you do not want to jump into the water without testing its depth" (*bu zhi shen qian*). Like many members, first I "lurked" (*qian shui*) in those forums for as long as two months before I posted my first message in May. After all, travel opportunities in March and

April were quite limited by the long winter of Beijing, so it suited me very well to use the "lurking" period to learn the rules, vocabulary, codes of behavior as well as the people and their online usernames.

To begin my learning process, I read the messages for new members, the suggestions from old members, travelogues and blogs, and I read other's profiles before I wrote my own. The messages for newcomers mainly covered three areas regarding how to become a Lvye donkey: regulations and rules, online posting, and offline activity. A post "About the Lvye" enthusiastically advocates that Lvye is a "free public platform for the promotion of outdoor activities based on the AA (i.e. equal-sharing) system, and then it gives a full and detailed statement with respect to the foundation and development of the Lvye, its ideals and goals, the nature of Lvye and outdoor activities, agreement to use the website and to initiate and participate in any travel activities organized by Lvye members. The statement emphasizes the utopian and idealistic nature of the venture, and highlights spontaneity, freedom, equality, democracy and participation as some of its founding values. Thus to become a Lvye person, one needs to "love travel and outdoor activities," "enjoy a democratic and free atmosphere," and "find joy in participating and giving." As a "Lvye person" (*Lvye ren*) in this big "Lvye family" (*Lvye jiayuan*), one "is equal to everyone else in terms of rights, obligations and dignity," and "have the freedom to express your opinion."

Core values such as participation, equality and freedom are also evoked in the principles regulating online posting and offline activities. One of the reasons behind the popularity of travel websites is that anyone can choose to initiate a trip, or join a trip organized by others by posting a message, sharing the costs on the road, and upon return from the trip, have the freedom to comment about the trip, the place and the people. Both the initiators and participants of a planned

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trip gain a certain degree of control in shaping the itinerary, content and final outcome of the journey; once "in", they signal both an ownership over and commitment to the trip and travel community. These features should be attributed to the fact that both Lvye.org and Lvye.info evolved around an online bulletin board, which makes the voluntary participation and interactions between travelers possible.

Today, Lvye.org still operates on the public forums, while Lvye.info functions more like a portal site with pages that promote outdoor supply stores, mountaineering and skiing knowledge, and providing services to purchase travel insurance and book rooms in hostels. Despite the extra functions added to the websites, donkey friends use the sites mainly for the functions of communication and interaction provided by the forums. This observation corresponds to the statistics published by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), that indicate that Chinese Internet users are more attracted to the social than the commercial functions of the Internet.

Table 1 Select Network Services Used by Internet Users in China (Multiple Options), July 2003 - July 2006 (in percent) (Source: China Internet Network Information Center Survey reports, July 2003, July 2004, July 2005, and July 2006. See http://www.cnnic.gov.cn)

	Email	Online Communication	Online Forums	Online Shopping	Online Booking
2003	91.8	45.4	22.6	11.7	0.5
2004	84.3	40.2	21.3	7.3	0.4
2005	91.3	44.9	40.6	19.6	2.6
2006	64.2	42.7	43.2	26.9	5.4

There are five core forums at Lvye.org and six at Lvye.info, and many of them overlap.

Take Lvye.org for example, the basic structure of its forums are illustrated in this chart:
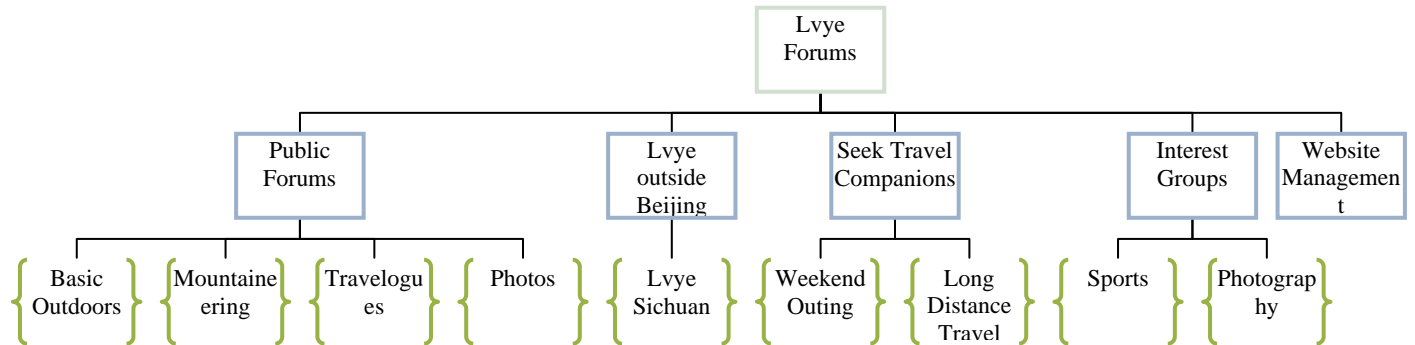
Figure 3 an example of the hierarchical structure of Lvye forums

At Lvye.org, three days after registration, a newcomer can post a message on "Basic Outdoors" seven days after registration on "Travelogues", fourteen days for "Weekend Outing" and "Long Distance Travel", and thirty days for "Mountaineering." The logic behind this is that one should take time to learn the rules before taking part in both online and offline activities. An introduction post for new members suggests to them that during the first three days they read and understand the Lvye outdoor activity terms (*Lvye huwai huodong gongyue*), which teaches them to "play the game" right. On the fourth day, a new member can post a message of self-introduction on "Basic Outdoors." Seven days later, he or she can read and post on "Travelogues." After fourteen days, he or she is finally allowed to post on the core forums where donkey friends initiate and organize trips and related activities. This does not mean that a newcomer cannot join a trip before fulfilling fourteen days requirement however, since there are always alternative options such as asking a member to sign up on his or her behalf or simply calling the trip organizer directly.

2.1.2 Sign up for the Trip

After my two-months of preparation, I was confident about how to "play the game." For instance, I knew that it was a waste of time to post a message of self-introduction, which could, at best, gain you several "welcomes" messages, but most of the time, no one really read it. To become known, I had to join outings organized by the more established members followed by posting travelogues and photos. At Lvye.info, these online and offline activities are translated into points that can be exchanged for prizes ranging from headwear to backpacks.[9] I have learned that an experienced and responsible leader was extremely important to guarantee a safe and pleasant outing. Although theoretically anyone, after the preparation period since registering himself or herself as a member, can initiate an activity or a trip, each person's qualifications vary. There were sometimes more than ten trip-plans posted in a single day during the travel seasons in the summer, so before I decided which trip I should join, I read the initiators' profiles to check their qualifications. A typical profile is like an outdoor résumé including one's contact information, time of registration, number of messages posted, and most important, a list of one's outdoor experience: when, where, nature of the trip (leisure, hardship, long distance and so on), and name of the organizer. Reading these profiles, I would consider if he or she had much outdoor experience, how many times he or she had led the trips, how difficult or relaxed those trips were, and from the messages he or she posted, how friendly he or she was. A more careful donkey might even have searched the activities mentioned in his or her résumé and see how his or her teammates commented about him or her.

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[9] For example, new registration 100 pts, post exceeding 1000 words 10 pts, responding a post 3pts, joining an activity 30pts, uploading photos 5pts, and etc..

The second important thing is to read the activity message closely. The content of the message should include the description of the trip, meeting date, meeting place, trip cost, group size, and qualification for participation. To understand the content of such posts, it is necessary to learn a set of unique vocabulary that is used among donkey friends. First, there are different types of "donkeys" in terms of outdoor experience and particular travel activities he or she would like to participate in. An experienced and frequent traveler is called an "old donkey" (*lao lv*), travelers who prefer adventure tourism such as mountain climbing and caving are called "mules" (*luo zi*), those who like to carry their cameras around and take photographs as one indispensible part of travel are "lust donkey" (*se lv*), because 'lust' (*se*) has the very close pronunciation with "photography" (*she*) in mandarin Chinese. Second, there are different types of trips. If an activity is labeled as ZN, then it refers to more physically challenging activities such as long-distance hikes, mountain climbing, caving, camping, or traveling to relatively "remote" areas of the ethnic minorities. In contrast, "FB" trips encompass such "pleasurable" activities as eating out, drinking in bars, singing and dancing, playing games and so on. It should be noted that despite their antithetical connotations, the two categories are not so exclusively clear cut; they are often indispensable components in a journey but with varied proportions. A ZN trip might guarantee a long day's hike in the mountains, but it will usually be followed by a sumptuous dinner and game playing, which are considered FB activities. FB trips in which I felt more confident to participate and I indeed participated most, I should be honest, never left me truly relaxed without feeling exhausted and worn out at last. They were FB trips in terms of relative easiness of the trip with less hardship activities and more leisure activities.

These are a few terms I learned as a "new donkey" (*xin lv*), but their more nuanced meanings were only revealed to me on the road. After a few days' study of the messages of

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activity in late April, 2005, I decided to join one. It was a two-day trip on the weekend of May 2 and 3. It included a three-hour train trip to an ancient post station on the border of Beijing and Hebei Province and a five to six hour hike on the second day. The rest of the days were spent relaxing and enjoying the rural life. The post of notification adopted the standard format as followed:

Initiator: XX   Contact number: xxx-xxxx-xxxx

Date: 5/2-3   Destination: Cockcrow Post Town

Rendezvous time/place: South Railway Station

Maximum participant number: 10   Nature of Activity: Leisure   Sign up due date: 4/27

Preface: Sense the traces of history and experience the peace with your eyes and heart; flee from the chaos of the city and rest your heart in a quiet place.

Agenda:

D1:   7am   meet at the South Railway Station

        7:29   play the Mafia game or play cards on the train

        10:39   arrive at Xi Bali Township, hike to Cockcrow

        12:00   arrive at Cockcrow. Visit the village, explore the historical traces, or just relax in the yard of the villager's house. In the evening, have dinner and spend the night at a local home, play the Mafia game.

D2:   6:30   get up and watch the sun rise

        7:00   rent a car to Shacheng; later take train to Jiu Zhuangwo

        9:07   arrive at Jiu Zhuangwo, free activity

        12:00   find a picnic place to FB

        13:00   hike along the river gorge

        18:22   arrive at Yan Hecheng Railway Station

        20:33   arrive at Beijing

Budget: 30~80 Yuan ($4~10)/per person

Required Equipments: bring your own lunches, water, and snacks. Bring a headlight or torch. Those who can't stand uncleanness can bring a sleeping bag. Dress warmly.

To sign up, respond to this post and specify your contact number.

Responsibility waiver statement: this activity is a non-profit self-organized outdoor activity. As there are always unexpected dangers and emergencies in any outdoor activities, participants should be responsible for their behavior and subsequent consequences. The initiator of the activity will be monitored by the participants; he or she will be responsible controlling the budget and publicizing expenditures later on, but he or she is not responsible for any emergencies incurred in any activities. …

This is the typical content of a message of activity. Some also include photos or use poetic languages to attract more participants. As I mentioned earlier, the success of organizing an activity depends not only on factors such as the timing of the activity, the attractiveness of the description, or the charm of the destination, but also the reputation of the person who makes the posting: is he or she an experienced traveler and an organizer? Is he or she a friendly person? Do fellow donkey friends seem to know him or her?

Since the activity I was going to join was a fairly relaxed trip that required little previous outdoor experience, I was not too picky about our leader – "Builder" as he called himself. "Builder" had a few outdoor activity experiences as a leader, most of which were leisure activities without too much hardship, and he seemed to be a friendly and easy-going person. This was evident from the pleasant tone in his posts in which he answered the questions raised by curious donkey friends, as well as from the fact that he let the maximum number of participants expand from ten to twenty.

To sign up for the trip, again, there is also a format and procedure. In my sign up post, I wrote, "donkey junior / 1MM / XXX-XXXX-XXXX / 0L0Z0radio / responsible for myself / obey arrangement / iron hole," which can be translated as "donkey junior (my ID), a female donkey whose contact number is xxx-xxxx-xxxx, who will be responsible for herself and follow the leader's instructions and directions; she has no stove (L), tent (Z) or radio; she will sign up

for the trip and will not withdraw (iron hole)." MM is the term for a female donkey, and L and Z stand for stove and tent as they are the first letters of *luzi* (stove) and *zhangpeng* (tent). The statement of being responsible for oneself and following the instructions are a recent development in response to outdoor emergencies that happened among donkey friends in recent years. To sign up but not guarantee that you will not back out is to "dig a hole"; "iron hole". An "iron hole" is a way to make a promise to join and secure a seat in the group. The initiator has the right to accept or reject a person after considering the difficulty of the activity and outdoor experience of a person.

The trip I signed up with was quite FB according to our initiator, which is probably why he was so flexible about the number and qualification of the participants. I did not have much outdoor experience at the time, except for a few travel experiences and regular workouts at gym, but I was accepted without too much trouble, even though when I signed up, the number of participants had already exceeded the maximum number. I caught the "last bus" of the trip.

2.1.3 On the Road

By 7 a.m., all nineteen donkey friends had already gathered on the platform; among us there were the organizer ("Builder") and his wife, "Suhan" and his classmates, "Jacky" and ""Guitar" with their girlfriends, and several single donkeys, three males and two females, who came by themselves. Most of us were at our early and late twenties; the majority was native Beijingers and the others had come to live in Beijing for study or work. The crowd was quiet in the beginning, but definitely not cold; everyone smiled at one another, eyes glistened with excitement and curiosity, without the leader's direction, we kept close together and gathered in a circle as if we had already known one another for a while.

"Builder" and his wife were among the first who arrived at the railway station, but he only joined the group after he had taken care of everything, such as buying tickets for those who had not arrived, giving them directions to the railway station over the phone, confirming our accommodation with the host of the farmstay, and so on. As soon as he managed all these things and it was full daylight at 7:30 a.m., we boarded the train and headed for our destination.

Although it was less than a three-hour train ride, it was a valuable opportunity to get to know one another and assign the responsibilities accordingly. The ice breaker game that has been widely known and played among donkey friends is called the Mafia game (*sharen youxi*). It was first created on the campus of Moscow University. It is difficult to trace when and where the game was first introduced to China, but the game has gained such popularity among the Chinese urban youth since the late 1990s that even "Mafia" clubs emerged in Beijing and spread to other cities of the country. The game is an integral part of a donkey friend journey, because most donkey friends are literally strangers when they begin to embark on a trip together, and by playing this game together, their fellowship can be effectively built and strengthened.

The basic game is to divide the people into two groups: "mafias" or "killers" who know each other; and "civilians" who generally know the number of killers amongst them. The goal of both teams is to eliminate each other before their own members are eliminated.[10] During the game, killers are allowed to kill one civilian during each round, and civilians, after one of them is killed, need to eliminate one suspect whom the majority of the group has decided on after serious, sometimes long and heated debate. The same thing goes on in the second and the subsequent rounds until all of the killers or civilians are eliminated. Like other ice breaker games, "Mafia" forces each person in the group to talk, no matter whether that person is shy or

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[10] More details of the game can be seen at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mafia_(game)

outspoken. As a result, after several rounds of the game, each person knows one another's bits and pieces, and sometimes he or she will be surprised to discover the inconsistency of a person's character from his or her appearance. For many donkey friends, the Mafia game is the most attractive part of a trip. It is always accompanied by jokes, laughter, intensive debate, intellectual challenge, as well as new discoveries about people. Thus it is not unusual to see that quite a few trips are organized for the primary purpose of playing the game.

Our organizer, "Builder" was a fan of the game too, and we played the game five times during the trip, once on the train, twice while waiting for the train or bus, and twice at the farm house. During the three hours of game-play on the train, we made some mistakes, calling people by the wrong IDs during the first few rounds, but eventually we all remembered one another's IDs and had some knowledge about people's character. One of the results of the game was that after getting off the train, there was more talk, joking and laughter in the group on the way to the ancient post station village. It was already past the middle of the day when we arrived at the town. Everyone was excited at the sight of the town wall where the classic movie "A Chinese Odyssey" was shot. Some could not wait to take out their cameras and ask their companions to pose in front of the wall, and others looked up at the wall and read aloud, in a joking way, the lines the hero in the movie said to the heroine. On that day, we did not run into any members of the film production crew, but we met another group of people who were dressed in familiar outdoor clothing and who carried bigger backpacks than the members in our team. They waved at us and greeted us from above the gate of the town. It occurred to me that I had seen another post organizing a trip to the same destination, but I had ignored it because the content of the trip seemed more ZN including two days' trekking and camping compared to our one day hiking and spending the night at a local home. These people turned out to be the donkey friends who had

signed up for that trip. Soon they were off to climb a nearby mountain. I felt secretly fortunate that I did not sign up with them, for I already felt tired after hiking from the train state to the village.

After exchanging some travel information with the other team, and after everyone was satisfied with the photographs they had taken, we entered the town. Curious about the Ming and Qing style courtyard houses, temples and offices still preserved by the town people, our group slowly wandered around the town to find our host place. As we stopped at the gate of an aristocratic house and marveled at its well-preserved delicacy and architectural details, the owner of the house stepped out and invited us in to look at the carvings and wall paintings inside the house. It was not free; he asked for five yuan per person. "Isn't it too pricey?" "Entry ticket for some part in Beijing only costs five yuan." People began to negotiate with the man; we ended up paying him two yuan per person on condition that we would not tell other visitors. When we were about to leave the house, we saw several tourists ready to visit the house. As promised, we did not tell them how much we paid for the entry fee. Builder winked at the man to express gratitude when we left.

It was a small town and it didn't take us long to find the local home we had reserved to spend the night. We had dinner with the host couple and each paid ten yuan for dinner and breakfast the next morning. Everyone in the group was tired and went to bed early after only a few rounds of Mafia, which disappointed Builder a little as he had originally planned to play the game until midnight.

The rreal challenge came on the second day, as we began our tougher "march" compared to our relatively leisure hike from the railway station to Cockcrow the previous day. We got up before dawn in order to catch the train to Jiu Zhuangwo Township. From there we were going to

walk to the next train stop and take the train back to Beijing. The hiking route between two train stations was said to be the most beautiful section along the gorge of Yongding River. It was also a difficult walk given the bad conditions of the sand and pebble road seldom traveled by foot passengers. After a hasty breakfast, we waved goodbye to our hosts and set off. For the first few hours' walk in the morning, travel along the river gorge was pleasant with the dew on the grass and trickling brooks on our side. Everyone's enthusiasm soared, and everyone was full of energy and excitement.

It was about the middle of the day when people were beginning to feel tired, we found an open grassy place amid a wood where we could have lunch and rest. We sat in a big circle and everyone took out their lunch, and put whatever they had brought in the middle so that all could share. Some brought beer, canned fish, beef and tomato, although quite usual in our everyday lives, these food were considered "luxurious" or FB in an outdoor environment, and indeed, never had such food or drink tasted more delicious. There were always costs for such "luxury" on the road; for example, you spent more on the trip and had to carry more stuff and a heavier backpack for most of the journey. However carrying extra FB goods was not without rewards, for the reputation of a generous and tough "donkey" would be acknowledged by his or her fellow travelers and soon the word would be spread on the Internet.

It was past 1 p.m. when we finished lunch and when everyone felt like having a nap, which was immediately overruled by Builder. So we got up and continued our journey. We were now in an area of small hills, going up and down hill, but seemingly always up rather than down. After a while, as we all grew more tired, our spirits fell. More frequently the road grew uneven and rough. When we began to climb the ascending path, we had to stop and rest every ten minutes or so. Our throats and lips grew parched and our faces soaked in the dirt mixed with

sweat. It was well into the late afternoon before we found ourselves in level fields again, and as the evening closed in, we could finally see the house – where the railways station was located – perched on the top of the ridge we were climbing; everyone pulled themselves up and got ready for the final victory to come. At last there came the moment when we dragged ourselves onto the ridge and realized that there were no more roads ahead and we had finally arrived at the platform we after a six hour hike. Twenty minutes later, the train arrived and took us back to Beijing; it was half past eight when we stood on the platform of the south Beijing railway station and bid each other goodbye.

Our journey ended here. However, the longer journey as a donkey friend and the relationships developed in this journey did not end there. A few days later, some members posted the travelogue on their personal Blogs, and some posted the photos taken in the journey on the Lvye website so that everyone could download them and comment on them. One of us collected everyone's contact information and sent the compiled list to everyone so that we could selectively add them to our personal mailing list or MSN Messenger.[11] In the end, we updated our profiles in the forums of Lvye; sooner or later, some of us would become the old donkeys with accumulated experience and reputations, and when opportunity came, they would initiate their own travel plans and lead new donkeys to embark on their journeys.

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[11] MSN Messenger is a freeware instant messaging client that was developed and distributed by Microsoft in 1999, together with QQ, a freeware developed in China, are popular contact means for the young people in China today.

2.2　　THE VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

My travel experience with donkey friends bears out the fact that donkey friend tourism cannot be separated from cyberspace. It was in the context of the Internet where a group of young backpackers conducted travel-related discussions and exchanged travel information that this new travelstyle emerged, accompanied with the development of various neologisms, ethos and behavioral codes related to the travel. Online interactions straddling pre-travel organization and post-travel follow-ups are crucial to the formation of a community of travelers who know one another and keep in constant touch. Once registered at a travel website, a person who wants to go backpacking starts by either posting notifications or signing up for trips online, followed by participating in actual travel activity offline, and then again online after the event to post travelogues, photos and comments about the activity, and maintaining contact with fellow travelers. This idiosyncratic travel experience raises an important feature of Chinese donkey friend tourism: in addition to the physical backpacking enclaves which we are familiar with in the tourism literature, the Chinese case shows that these backpacking enclaves also include cyberspace, in the form of virtual communities on the Internet.

In his insightful work, Anderson argued that in the eighteenth century Western Europe has seen the decline of religious communities and the dawn of a new mode of imagined community – the nation. The old sacred religious communities were imagined through the media of the sacred language, ruled by persons deemed having divine connections, and characterized by the conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable (Anderson 1983: 36). By contrast, the new form of imagined community – the modern nation – were made possible by the convergence of capitalism and print technology, so called "print-capitalism",

which laid bases for national consciousnesses and made people to relate themselves to others in radically new ways (1983: 37-46).

As human being entered the twentieth century, the development of science and technology has opened up a new arena for scholars to explore. The coming of the "information age" enabled new sorts of "imagined communities" and communicative practices based on the Internet, fostered new types of social relations, and cultivated new values. Much of the early literature applauded the new technology as revolutionary in its social and political implications (Poster 1990, Castells 1996, Gore 1991). Marshal McLuhan has tended to see this new world as a "global village" (1989). In his seminal work, Appadurai has suggested that Anderson's "imagined communities" were only "modest precursors to the world we live in now" (Appadurai 1996: 28). He extended Anderson's concept of "imagined community" to the "imagined world," by arguing that today's world is deterritorialized, national boundaries are shaken, and the relationship between states and nations is strained more than ever.

These scholars view the emergence of cyberspace as a watershed for creating new imagined selves and imagined communities for they presume a radical distinction and disruption between offline and online, real and virtual worlds, with the former represented as bounded, constraining and disciplining while the latter characterized as deterritorialized, egalitarian, and emancipatory. In contrast to this dichotomic thinking, Constable studied virtual communities of men and women involving international correspondence marriages, and observed that some communities sprang from localized groups and others served as a "space of contestation" that reinforced offline power relations and social boundaries (2003: 32, 22). By the same token, Wilson & Peterson argue that "the Internet is not growing apart from the world, but to the contrary is increasingly embedded in it," therefore it is necessary to "bring research back from

cyberspace and virtual reality into geographical, social spaces", and examine "how offline social roles and existing cultural ideologies are played out… in online communication", and "how online interactions are influenced by offline power relations and construction of identity" (Wilson & Peterson 2002:453-457).

More in keeping with this line of thinking, I argue that although the virtual communities of donkey friends allow them to cross many boundaries in terms of gender, class, geography and sociocultural backgrounds to communicate and travel as a group, travelers who are able to travel together nevertheless depend on offline encounters to earn qualification, respect, and make friends. At the same time, the Internet facilitates new imaginings of translocal identities and communities, accompanied by the development of new set of vocabulary, behavioral codes and ethos, all of which conversely call into question the everyday boundaries shaping and controlling local groups and local identities. As such, donkey friend tourism as a coherent activity in China necessarily involves continuous movement of participants between physical and virtual spaces, both of which constitute a complementary and concrete donkey friend experience. Ethnographic research in both virtual communities and physical journeys are thus necessary to understand the complex and frequent interactions between online and offline practices, their collective impact on creating new expressions and imaginings of translocal identities, which are by no means purely transcendental or deterritorialized, but constitute a field of contestation of ideas, values, and practices. Drawing upon the field experience of being a donkey friend, as described in previous pages, I will further demonstrate how online activities and offline trips are closely interwoven together and simultaneously challenged, violated or called into question the rules established in the other sphere.

2.2.1.1 Are You a "New Donkey"

There is a comic story of a new donkey widespread on the Internet:

"Xiao Wu registered at a travel website and became a fresh new donkey. A few days later, after he read all the handbooks for the new donkeys, he was quite confident that he would do as well as old donkeys and that no one could recognize him as a new one. He signed up for a weekend trip. As the day came, Xiao Wu was so excited that he got up even before the alarm rang. The organizer was calling everyone's name when he came to the rendezvous, "donkey 1," "donkey 2," … "Xiao Wu." "Here," Xiao Wu answered. "Are you a new donkey?" someone asked. "How do you know?" "Old donkeys always sign up with their web IDs. Have you seen anyone giving out their real names?" Xiao Wu blushed.

The group got on the bus; Xiao Wu sat besides a female donkey. "Are you a new donkey?" the girl asked. "Why…" "Look, other male donkeys carry at least 60L backpacks, yours only 25L." "But isn't it just a leisure activity?" "Are you a new donkey?" Someone from behind asked, "We old donkeys carry as much as we can even on leisure trips, water at least 6L, then a big watermelon." "Why watermelon…?" "Are you a new donkey? It's called FB tasting the delicious watermelon in the wilderness after a day's hike!" …"

The story goes on to show a number of naïve mistakes made by the new donkeys such as looking for a toilet in the mountains, refusing to have dinner together after the trip, choosing to take the bus instead of walking for a few stops, and forgetting to ask for discounts after dining at a restaurant. All of these behaviors, showing those "donkey" characters of toughness, frugality and a sense of fellowship, were not written in any handbooks Xiao Wu had read on the Internet, but they were important codes for one to enter the community and become one of the donkeys. Xiao Wu, apparently, is the object of mockery in this story because although he had gone

through the handbooks on the Internet very thoroughly, he failed to acknowledge and follow the behavioral codes recognized by the old donkeys because of his lack of actual travel experience in a group.

As a new donkey, I made some of the abovementioned mistakes too. I had given out my real name instead of my web ID, had looked for a bathroom in an outdoor environment, had wore the wrong clothing, carried the wrong bag, and asked naïve questions, and so on. On my first trip with Lvye donkeys, I did not know that all of us should eat our lunch together and everyone should bring something extra to share with the group. Embarrassed, I reluctantly took out my sandwich, which was only sufficient to feed myself, and put it in the middle, among all kinds of foods ranging from canned fish to potato chips. No one touched my sandwich because it was much easier to share potato chips than to share a sandwich. This experience taught me that even if it says to bring your own lunch on the notification post, you should bring a lot more to share, which is not only important for the reputation of a donkey, but also crucial to maintain the sense of fellowship and solidarity among donkeys, with which they distinguish themselves from casual encounters in their everyday lives.

I asked one of my informants, "Jeep girl", who belonged to another web-based travel community, "How can a person become accepted in the community?" She said, "Well, we all have been there. It is not like you register and you are in. The fact is you are new, no one knows you. A web ID cannot say anything about you. If you do not make any effort to meet other members, you are never in." Jeep girl registered herself in an Internet forum during the National Day holidays of 2003 (October 1 – 7), when most members were out of town and unable to acknowledge her registration in the forum. It was quite by chance that she caught a glimpse of a post in which a member asked whether anyone could help her to get her husband an appointment

for an early operation at Renmin Hospital. Using her personal connections with a doctor at the hospital, Jeep girl conveniently arranged an early schedule for the couple. This event proved to be a turning point for Jeep girl to be all of a sudden transformed from a new donkey to a donkey friend enjoying as much of a reputation and respect as old donkeys. Although this sort of opportunity is rare, Jeep girl's experience demonstrates that one's admission into an Internet community, and one's reputation earned subsequently can have very little to do with how many posts he or she contributes and how long s/he spends online everyday. Memberships in cyberspace and in face-to-face contexts are influenced and restricted by their offline power relations and everyday life mentalities. Due to the reforms of the Chinese medical care system and consequent difficulty of seeing a doctor (*kanbing nan*) (e.g. difficulty of making an appointment, and high medical expenses), having connections with those working in hospitals is still viewed as a significant social privilege, often admired in contemporary Chinese society. This admiration is clearly revealed in online contexts. Appreciation of her help aside, admiration of Jeep girl having such a privileged connection in everyday life helped her enter the cyberspace community and transform herself from a new donkey to an old donkey.

2.2.1.2 "It is All about Pouring Water"

"Why does everyone know you? Isn't it the first time you are participating in a Lvye activity?" I asked a donkey who was as new as I was on our way to the Cockcrow village. I did not realize that he was new until he told me, because everyone seemed to have known him a long time. "It is all about pouring water," he winked at me, taking pride in himself for knowing the secret of being popular. "Pour water" is an expression for posting light talk or off-topic messages which could be jokes, pictures, or short messages with little content. The main purpose of "pouring water" is to make your ID known and familiar to others, and to lay the foundation upon

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which a reputation can be built. A person, or specifically, one's username, can become well known for being a good writer or photographer by posting online. Even if your writing and photographic skills are not good enough to impress people, you can still pour water to promote your popularity.

I have demonstrated how offline power relations and social networks impact one's online reputation. Now I argue that, conversely, online communication and interaction can empower a person as well. Before I was registered with Lvye, I had an opportunity to attend a weekend outing organized by another web-based travel community. I was completely new and I knew nobody except the friend who had invited me. I had never logged into their Internet forum or "poured water" before. By contrast, all the other donkeys who signed up for this trip from the Internet forum knew one another by their web IDs. Although many of them met one another for the first time, as did I, they recognized the familiar IDs immediately, often accompanied with such exclamations as "Oh, you are XX" or "finally I get to see XX with my own eyes" or "So XX is not a male!" As soon as each person had introduced themselves starting their forum IDs, others would quote what he or she had said on the Internet, raise questions about his or her ID, or continue earlier discussions they had engaged with in the forum. When it was my turn to introduce myself, I had no ID yet, I had not engaged in any online discussions. All I could say was my real name, where I came from, and who brought me, which hardly gained me any reaction or response from the crowd. I was embarrassed, like Xiao Wu, not because I had to let those whom I could only identify by their IDs know my real name, but because that I felt the lack of some significant connection with these people. Their online identities and relations were carried smoothly into the offline face-to-face encounters, and as a result, facilitated a sense of fellowship and created a "community of sentiment" (Appadurai 1996). Scholars have considered

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the construction of dichotomies of offline and online, real and virtual, and individual and collective as less useful than the investigation of the continuum of communities, identities, and networks when doing a research on the Internet and in virtual communities (Wilson & Peterson 2002, Agre 1999, Constable 2003). My own field experience bears out this continuum of identities and social relations established on the Internet, without which I was isolated from the group even while we physically traveled together.

Pouring water aside, understanding and using the set of unique vocabulary, expressions, and symbols coined on the Internet is also necessary for one to engage in activities and socialization in face-to-face contexts. Crystal states that "if the Internet is a revolution, […] it is likely to be a linguistic revolution" (2001: x). Interacting members of online communities share to some extent communicative practices, beliefs, and norms, which create a sense of fellowship and solidarity and call into question everyday boundaries shaping and controlling local groups and local identities in a variety of face-to-face contexts. This is demonstrated vividly by Peter Steiner (1993) in his famous cartoon, "on the Internet, nobody knows you are a dog," or you can add, "if you know how to type the right language on the Internet, no matter whether you speak or you bark, nobody knows you are a dog."

Donkey friends have created a unique set of language to describe places, various travel activities, and different types of travelers, originally for the convenience of writing on the Internet. For example, they use the initial *pinyin* letters to replace some words for short, e.g. ZT for *zhuan tie* (post from other forums) or just use *pinyin* to evade the screening of the sensitive words, e.g. *Tiananmen*. Later, new vocabularies were created, drawing from existing linguistic repertoires but imbued with different meanings. For example, FB and ZN are two new linguistic plays on the original words "corruption" and "sadism", referring to two types of activities in

which donkey friends organize and participate: leisure tourism and hardship tourism. However, as my travel experience has showed, FB activities have nothing to do with actual corruption or behaviors that seek illegitimate personal gains through bribery, extortion or cronyism, but indicate relatively leisure activities. FB indicates things and activities that bring great pleasure with little cost, such as enjoying the sunshine in a country yard, or having a cup of tea on the top of a mountain. These linguistic codes developed on the Internet have been so well-incorporated into the offline communicative practices of donkey friends and beyond, that they can be heard in a variety of face-to-face contexts ranging from on the street to college dorms. By applying these codes to everyday language, donkey friends have replaced the broader linguistic hierarchies evolved around Mandarin Chinese with a more open and egalitarian system of language, in which everyone is equal as long as they speak the same donkey language.

China has long been a multilingual nation, and people from different places speak different dialects. The current official spoken language of China is called standard Mandarin (*putong hua*), which is based on the particular Mandarin dialect spoken in Beijing, enjoying the highest social privilege compared to any other dialect. Contextualized in the Chinese socioeconomic structure, each dialect has different connotations and evokes different attitudes and sentiment towards the speaker. For example, Henan dialect is often referred as a rural dialect and hence the object of the mockery, while Cantonese is more accepted and sometimes admired and imitated by non-Cantonese people probably because Canton is more economically well off and is physically close to Hong Kong. It is against this sociocultural background, that the creation of the new linguistic codes on the Internet is significant, for it allows the users to construct a collective identity and community that crosses everyday boundaries shaping and controlling local identities and communities. This said, online communities defined by language

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and shared interests, across many geographical and sociocultural boundaries, simultaneously serve as a site of contestation where different ideas, values, and practices are in constant negotiation. The way the Internet has turned travel websites and forums into more than a method of exchanging information and into a community itself is a process of reifying and reinforcing many boundaries and differences, as will be described below.

2.2.1.3 "We are Lvye and we are different"

In Anthropology, the concept of community itself might be misleading. It used to imply a closed and self-contained circumscribed group to which individuals belong exclusively (Redfield 1947). The more recent studies of community often critique the inefficiency of this previous conceptual framework in that it often disguises rather than discloses the heterogeneity of the community and diversity of interactions of individuals of that community and others (Wilson and Peterson 2002; Appadurai 1996). Marcus has proposed a more flexible concept of community in cross-cultural, multi-sited and multileveled contexts (1986). Wilson and Peterson recognize that individuals within any community are simultaneously part of other interacting communities (2002). To push the idea further, Appadurai has seen that new electronic media is capable of creating new communities of sentiment that are often transnational and operate beyond the boundaries of nation (1996).

In contrast to Appadurai, Constable has seen within the Internet communities of men and women who marry across state boundaries, they in fact depend on the state, reify the state, and reinforce its boundaries while also crossing them (2003: 32). In keeping with Constable, I argue that while online donkey friend communities allow individuals with shared interests to cross geographic, sociocultural boundaries to meet and interact, they, nevertheless, reproduce those boundaries in on- and offline practices.

There are more than three hundred outdoor and travel online communities spreading in major cities and provinces of the country, and seventy five of them are headquartered in Beijing. Among these communities, some are run by travel enthusiasts independently, some are attached to an outdoor store or a café, and some are affiliated with some upper-level social organizations like the China Mountaineering Association. Despite their different affiliations and manners of operation, all of them have an important Internet component in the form of websites and forums where members discuss travel-related issues and initiate travel activities. The membership in these communities might be overlapping, but a traveler tends to be loyal to one or two groups because it is more efficient to gain a reputation and popularity among a more fixed and stable group of people. Therefore, different communities take on different characteristics when they draw in different types of people who emphasize certain types of travel activities or share certain kinds of goals and ethos. Take the communities I studied for example. They are made up of people of different age cohorts, socioeconomic backgrounds and gender groups. One group is composed of male-dominated Cherokee jeep drivers, with a few female members, most of whom are the wives or girlfriends of the male members. Constrained by economic conditions that accompany the ability to afford a gasoline-consuming car, members of this group usually fall into the age range of 30 through 50. Most of them have obtained a college degree; most have worked for more than five years after graduation; most are married with or without children, and live a rather stable and affluent life. By contrast, another community that focuses its interest on travel and photography appeals to a comparatively younger generation, who falls around the age of 30 and share similar tastes in culture and styles. This community is well known for organizing lecture series on various cultural themes ranging from photography and travel to history and ecology. Its membership is mostly drawn from students, intellectuals, and newly emerged middle

class in the cities. The greatest diversity of membership can be found in Lvye, also one of the communities I studied, which has the highest enrollment compared with the other two; its members are mostly diversified in age and socioeconomic backgrounds. Its members engage in a variety of outdoor and travel activities ranging from more extreme activities such as snow and ice climbing, desert trekking, rock climbing, to more relaxed journeys to Lijiang, Dali and other frontier cities, to everyday sports activities such as tennis, badminton and swimming. In contrast to the other two communities, Lvye is well known for intentionally seeking out low cost, hardship travel experiences, and off-the-beaten track tours. It draws members who are around 25 years old, who are not economically well-off, and who seek to experience excitement and inspiration from their journeys.

Each community I have studied possesses distinct characteristics, and each of them draws members from different age cohorts and socioeconomic backgrounds. People who belong to different communities are also well aware of their differences. For example, a member of the Cherokee team told me proudly, "our people are more generous (*dafang*). We don't care too much about details or trivia, neither do we calculate every cent we spend (*jinjin jijiao*). We are more masculine." Even its female members promote this sense of masculinity, "our women are usually more skillful at driving than ordinary females. They are also generous like men." Travelers sometimes intentionally draw boundaries between different communities, as a member from the Travel and Photography Club informed me with obvious contempt, "I will never go out with the Lvye people, since they care too much about the costs. They want to spend the least amount of money on everything!" Attaching idiosyncratic characteristics to their own communities and differentiating themselves from members of other communities, travelers have not formed a coherent and homogeneous pan-community transcending differences, conflicts and

hierarchies; rather, they reproduce and reinforce the existing boundaries in terms of age, gender and class. Although these online communities all claim to be donkey friend communities, they have not brought all travelers together into one imagined world, but have rather drawn borders, sometimes porous and indistinct ones, to appeal to, reify and rearticulate different values, interests, and types of social relations.

2.3   VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Donkey friend communities represent a cultural invention that finds its origin at the intersection of travel and the Internet. It brings forth a social realm in the sense that it emerges out of particular social conditions and in turn helps to create new ones. As the Internet is an integral part of donkey friend tourism, a two-pronged research method is necessary to understand the processes through which the Internet has turned the travel websites and forums into more than a method of information exchange and into a community, and serve as a crucial arena for the creation of travel and grassroots culture in contemporary China. One prong involves conventional participant observation and anthropological interviews in a face-to-face context. The other prong must deal with a less conventional component of virtual ethnography – fieldwork from my computer – in the electronic, mass-mediated communities of travelers. This research method presents new challenges, both empirically and methodologically, for tourism studies and ethnographic research: how are travel experiences framed by both online and offline activities? How do these activities feed on each other and impact field research? How does the role of the Internet exhibit the ethnographic potential of virtual ethnography? How does it present challenges to the by now well-criticized dichotomies of online and offline, and virtual

and real? And how does it expand the ethnographic understanding of community? To answer these questions, this chapter has drawn upon my field experience as a donkey friend participant observer, including both an Internet aspect and a conventional in face-to-face context. This experience has revealed the three main features of donkey friend tourism: web-based phenomenon, group activity, and idiosyncratic linguistic and behavioral codes, all of which serve to challenge the radical and binary view of cyberspace as a rupture, a new "imagined world", separate from everyday lives. On the one hand, the Internet has facilitated the emergence of online interactions of dispersed groups of people with shared interests in travel, and on the other hand, those online communities are not growing apart from the world, but are continually and constantly embedded in it, and interwoven with offline power relations and existing cultural ideologies. Through these processes new identities and social networks are negotiated and constructed. It is in this sense that virtual ethnography is well suited to deconstruct the dichotomies of offline and online, real and virtual, and individual and collective, and to investigate the continuum and negotiation of communities, identities, and networks in both cyberspace and face-to-face contexts.

As noted, my research has incorporated two parts, one part involves traditionally oriented ethnography based on the notion of conducting ethnographic research in "real" communities in face-to-face contexts; the other part involves the Internet aspects of these communities, without which, donkey friends would have little chance of meeting one another in person, let alone forming communities. Based on three months of preliminary field research in 2003 and 2004, and a year of fieldwork in 2005 in Beijing, the conventional part of my research was carried out in three donkey friend communities headquartered in Beijing, accompanied by three long-distance self-organized donkey friend journeys to the Inner Mongolia, Yunnan Province, and

Jiangxi Province, and more than a dozen short excursions, hiking and trekking, mountain climbing, camping, etc. in the outskirts of Beijing. Self-organized journeys aside, I regularly joined a variety of public gatherings of donkey friends in the forms of meeting preparation, reunion dinners, FB dinners, seminars and exhibitions, and I attended private gatherings such as photo shows (*guanpian hui*) and meals at a fellow donkey friend's house. During the field research, qualitative data was collected, including documents, policies, publications of alternative guidebooks, media articles, and private publications circulated within donkey friend communities. I conducted the formal, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with twenty key informants, and informal and spontaneous interviews with fifty or so donkey friends while we met on trips or gatherings. In order to understand the demographic information of donkey friend communities, I sent out three hundred copies of survey questionnaires via both the Internet and face-to-face encounters to the members in the three communities as well as donkey friends I met on the road in Yunnan and Jiangxi Provinces.

The Internet aspect of my field research involved three different but overlapping components: research on the Internet forums that I joined as a researcher/member, research of travel writings and travel-related blogs published on the Internet, and research via email and web instant messaging tools. All of these dimensions of virtual communities supplement my field research by revealing the complex and constant construction and negotiation of new identities, social networks and communities. For about two years, beginning in 2003, from my personal computer in the United States, I communicated via the Internet with a number of Chinese travelers who used the Internet to organize trips and seek travel companions, and I also read and followed online discussions in several donkey friend online forums, including Lvye. I met and got to know some of the abovementioned travelers in person in 2005 when I was in China during

the course of my research, and they were very helpful in assisting me in meeting more donkey friends, and participating in their activities before I was registered at any communities. I met another fifty or so donkey friends from the three communities in which I was granted the permission to join as a researcher. As a legitimate member of these communities, I could browse all the online posts, follow the thread of each discussion, and participate in debates and discussions. Sometimes when a hot topic was brought up, such as the one regarding the advantages and disadvantages of building the Qinghai – Tibet railway, I had to read over a hundred posts a day and communicate with donkey friends from all over the country to know their opinions. In addition to participating in their online activities, I was able to join the trips initiated by the members, read the opinions of my travel companions after the trip and track the follow-up online discussions and debates thus entailed.

2.3.1   Joining Communities

The three communities I studied are: the Cherokee Team (referred to as the "Team"), the Travel and Photography Club (referred as the "Club"), and Lvye Outdoor Club (referred as Lvye). These communities can be seen as both real and virtual because they all have a public website or Internet forum where members actively participate, and their members also meet and get to know one another in person in face-to-face occasions like traveling together, having group dinners, hosting exhibitions and lectures, and setting up reunion gatherings. As I signed up and joined their communities, I acknowledged my research purpose and intentions to the forum moderators and community organizers. Expecting doubts and interrogations from them about my motivation, I was surprised and relieved that both forum moderators and fellow donkey friends were enthusiastic about my research and eager to help. For instance, I posted my research objectives

on the Internet forum of the Cherokee Team, I received a number of responses such as "Welcome onboard," "Interesting," "Like to help," and so on. All comments were warmhearted and encouraging. Some also added me to their Microsoft Network (MSN) Messenger contact list so as to offer me personal help.

On reflection, the easy entry I gained seems less attributable to their interest in my research per se and more to their delight in learning that their social existence had obtained enough recognition as to become a research topic. Even though their real names and identities are often hidden behind web IDs, they take pride in how long they have been participating in the forum and contributing to it. They take their web identities so seriously that a person would often keep a single ID for years and post to the forum regularly to build up his/her online reputation. At the same time, the warm welcome I received should be attributed to the typical open and free atmosphere prevalent in donkey friend communities. During the course of my fieldwork, I observed that donkey friends were indeed more open-minded and outspoken than people I met in everyday contexts. The reason lies not so much in the travelers' characters as their milieu of social interactions. Most of donkey friend socializing takes place either on the Internet or on a trip. Both are liminal spaces that provide greater freedom to speak, while reducing caution and suspicion that are more common in other contexts such as work units, schools or neighborhoods.

2.3.1.1 The Cherokee Team

A few days after I returned to Beijing in January 2005, an old friend called and invited me to join a weekend mountain climbing excursion with "his people." It turned out that "his people" were all driving Cherokee jeeps and belonged to a travel community called "The Cherokee Team." The weekend trip with my friend gave me the opportunity to enter their community and become "almost" one of them. I could sign up and log in its Internet forum at

Sina.com, submit posts, and chat with those who I had already met on the weekend trip. But I was not officially approved until after I sent an email to one of the moderators of the forum, submitting a request to join. In the email I sent, I was required to specify the following personal information: forum ID, real name, gender, driving years, city of residence, car type, vehicle number, vehicle color, email address, contact phone number, and mailing address (which would be used to receive the Team badge). A few days later, I received a badge sticker (as shown below) to be pasted on the body of the car, signifying that I was already a member of the Team. It should be noted that I did not drive a Cherokee but a FIAT sedan. That did not deter them from accepting me as part of the Team. It was not how you travel alone that bound the donkey friends together, but a desire to travel together and make friends that makes the membership legitimate.

Figure 4 Cherokee Team Badge

Figure 5 Cherokee Jeep with the Team Logo

2.3.1.2 The Travel and Photography Club

The "Travel and Photography Club" is another community I was able to join through my network of friends and classmates. As I spread the news among my friends and old classmates that I had returned to Beijing and was starting to conduct my research with donkey friends, a number of my old classmates contacted me and told me that they knew people whom I might be interested in meeting. Among them, one of my high school classmates told me about the Travel and Photography Club, a self-organized travelers' group. The owners ran a café and a website, both of which aimed to help donkey friends organize trips and socialize. At the time I was introduced to the Club, it was going to organize a trip to an environmental preservation zone located in Inner Mongolia, and was recruiting donkey friends for the trip. I submitted an online request to join the trip, leaving my contact information and waiting for approval. There were thirty people who signed up for the trip and, as far as I was aware, no one was turned down. Each person was required to pay a 120 Yuan registration fee and share extra costs and expenses incurred on the road. A Club member who paid the annual membership fee of 120 Yuan had the registration fee waived. A member could also enjoy discounts in later club activities. It was wise to become a Club member and pay the annual member fee before signing up for the trip, which was I decided to do. Before we set out to Inner Mongolia, I had officially become a Club member.

2.3.1.3 Lvye

The third donkey friend community, Lvye, described earlier in this chapter, is so well-known among Chinese donkey friends that it was not at all difficult to locate and join. It is part of a nationwide web-based portal network providing donkey friends with travel information, helping them seek travel companions, and allowing them to organize long distant trips as well as

weekend outings. I have described about how I registered at the website, studied the rules and codes, and joined an activity initiated by a donkey friend in the beginning of this chapter. I will only mention that it was the only community I joined by myself without any connections or contacts from my networks of friends or classmates.

2.4   CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have analyzed the emergence of donkey friend tourism and donkey friend communities as a new cultural phenomenon concomitant with the development of the Internet in contemporary China urban. I have examined both online and offline components of the new travel style, and argued that both online interactions and offline touristic engagements constitute the donkey friend experiences. This new and prominent feature of Chinese youth traveling culture calls for a two-pronged research method. One prong involves conventional face-to-face fieldwork and participant observation, and the other involves a less conventional component of virtual ethnography – fieldwork on the Internet. Drawing upon my field experiences in both online and offline contexts, I have found that dichotomies such as online / offline, virtual / real cannot be taken for granted, and should be refined by recognizing the continuum of social relations, identities, and networks, that function in constant negotiation and interaction between online socializing and offline face-to-face encounters. As the Internet facilitates the emergence of communities among donkey friends, becoming a donkey friend entails coming into a community of some shared values that cross geographical, social and cultural boundaries. At the same time, each one of the three communities I studied claimed to be a donkey friend community; however, their members consciously draw boundaries among themselves by verbal

and nonverbal means. In so doing, social hierarchies and cultural norms are reinforced and reproduced. New liminal spaces on the Internet and on the road give rise to new types of social networks, interpersonal relationships and cultural identities. In next chapters, I will explore how donkey friend tourism has facilitated the development of new sorts of social relationships and new urban subjectivities, which constitute part of the new urban public sphere in contemporary China.

3.0 MAKING DONKEY FRIENDS: RECONFIGURATIONS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS AND GUANXIXUE IN URBAN CHINA

3.1 SOCIAL NETWORKS AND GUANXIXUE IN CHINA: FROM CONFUCIUS TO THE STATE

China has long been recognized as a "network society" (Parsons 1959; Liang 1963; Fei 1992). As summed up in his seminal essays, Fei Xiaotong (1992) pointed out that, compared to the Western societies where individuals obtain clear membership by being affiliated with certain groups, communities or organizations, with unmistakably delineated rights and obligations, Chinese society is instead composed of "webs woven out of countless personal relationships" centered around kinship networks (Fei 1992: 78). The overall structures and organizational principles of kinship extended to neighborhood, lineage, the empire, and the world under the heaven (*tian xia*). He specified that the modalities of social relationship in China are ego-centered, like the ripples formed from a stone thrown into a lake; the more distant each circle (personal relationship or network) spreading out from the center (self) is, the more insignificant that connection becomes to the self (65). Fei asserted that social networks and personalistic relationships have been important in the everyday life of Chinese people, and played a crucial role in forming subjectivities and defining rights, obligations and indebtedness. These interpersonal relationships and networks in imperial China not only relied on kinship and lineage

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ties, but also assumed the forms of guild associations (*hanghui*) and native-place associations (*tongxianghui*), in which merchants and migrants in a strange city could solicit material and emotional support from the people thus connected (Yang 1994a: 151).

The predominant significance of interpersonal relationships and social networks in Chinese society has gathered considerable scholarly attention to the studies of *guanxixue* – the art of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* ("network", "social relations" or "connections") encompasses a wide range of social practices based on the principles of reciprocity and gift exchange. Scholars like Fei Xiaotong tend to see guanxi as the core of a Confucian ethics, and thus an integral and essential part of Chinese culture that dominated Chinese society and regulated social interactions of Chinese people (Parsons 1959; Liang 1963; Weber 1968; King 1985, 1991; Hwang 1987). Guanxi, in its original sense, refers to a relation, not an instrumental connection as it often evokes nowadays (Bell 2000). One of the basic principles in the Confucian thinking is concerned with the kind of relations established between individuals. An individual of "perfect virtue" (*ren*) should suppress inclinations toward personal desire and gain but conduct relationships properly in a social context according to the distance of kinship and levels of obligations (King 1985: 63). Despite the Confucian emphasis on ritual propriety (*li*) in conducting social relationships, instrumental use of guanxi was not uncommon in imperial China. One example is that the imperial officials were able to shield their lineages and local communities from taxation and conscriptions for labor or war, or do so through indirect guanxi developed with the fellow officials (Yang 1994a: 150-1).

Traditional social networks and personalistic relationships went through a dramatic transformation in the immediate years following the Communist Revolution in 1949, as people of my parents' generation can still vividly recall the simple (*jiandan*) and naïve (*danchun*) days

of the 1950s and 1960s. The new regime carried out socialist collectivization by not only confiscating private land and property, but also by replacing the private and particularistic relationships of reciprocity with a "collective" one – the comradeship, characterized by the universal morality by which all individuals were to be treated equally (Vogel 1965). Confucian ethics and practices of guanxi were vehemently attacked for their emphasis on kinship, social hierarchy and imperial order, as well as their potential for producing informal alliances and nepotism, all of which were viewed as feudalistic and oppressive, and obstructive to the construction of Communist rule. The decline of personalistic exchange in the 1950s and 1960s can also be attributed to the fear of political persecution that led to many people's withdrawal from private relationships and even from some important kinship relations, at a time when family members could turn against one another at any stage of a political campaign. By putting the interest and goals of the Party above those of friendship and kinship, Chinese people lost a private ethic they used to hold to support the commitment of the individual to his/her personal social networks (Vogel 1965; Gold 1985).

Despite the fact that the use of personal networks to get things done was negatively sanctioned, there were, nevertheless, increasing numbers of people who began to use guanxi to secure scare goods and receive benefits in the early 1960s, especially during the "Three Years of Hardship" (1959 – 1961) (Yang 1994a: 153-4). In the similar vein, Gold raises the question of whether in those years the state had really turned friendship into comradeship as it intended, or had merely produced ritualized behavior and superficial obedience of the ordinary people. Gold argued that guanxi, as an informal and unofficial interpersonal relationship and social network based on reciprocity, had never disappeared from everyday lives but was increasingly appropriated by the people to get things done, to secure scarce goods and to obtain protection

even in the years immediately following the Communist Revolution (Gold 1985). Guanxi practices, viewed from this perspective, began to assume a new and narrower definition centered on instrumental exchanges of gifts and favors, a departure from the Confucian ideals of human relationships centered on ritual propriety and checked by such everyday institutions as family, kinship, neighborhood and community.

The instrumental aspect of guanxi aside, some studies have revealed the positive connotations of guanxi practices. For example, Mayfair Yang describes how people appropriated guanxi networks to build trusting relationships and evoke human sentiment (*renqing*) to counterbalance the cold and inhuman state ideologies of Party loyalty, collective interest and abstract principles in the early years of Communist rule (Yang 1994a:72). Smart also argues that guanxi is more than a tactic used to gain immediate profits and other desired goals, and the instrumental goal is actually subordinated to the greater aim of developing long-term relationships and close human feelings or rapport (*ganqing*), without which the attempts to build guanxi relationship would necessarily fail (Smart 1993: 403). To push the significance of guanxi networks further, Yang argues that, at the hermeneutic level, guanxi practices constitute a social realm separate from the state, or *minjian* as she calls it, a realm of people-to-people relationships, which can serve as an oppositional and subversive force circumventing state power in the context of a centralized economy (1994a: 174). To argue that guanxixue constitutes a non-governmental realm bearing the incipient forms of civil society in China, Yang explains that under the social and political condition that Chinese people had not yet been able to form independent associations and develop a strong discourse of rights and of individualism, guanxi and *renqing* networks carved out a sphere of horizontal ties that cut through the vertical relationships found in the bureaucratic state along with its techniques of normalization and discipline (1994a: 205).

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Therefore, she proposes that the art of guanxi is definitely an area to watch for in both a state centralized economy and in a market economy, as guanxixue, along with its bonds of obligation and indebtedness, harbor subversive forces and tactics counterbalancing not only a totalizing state but also capitalist principles of rational calculation and accumulation (Yang 1994a; 2002).

3.2   THE "REDISCOVERY" OF GUANXIXUE IN THE REFORM ERA

Predicated on the earlier studies focusing on guanxixue and networks, this chapter will discuss the emergence of a new form of guanxi relationship and social network in urban China today. Before I go on to describe and explain the logic and mechanics of this newly emerged guanxi I found within donkey friend communities, I will first explore the socioeconomic and political conditions, as well as the changes in social relations, in the reform era that have led to its emergence.

Twenty years ago, a centralized state economy and distributive mode of exchange dominated Chinese everyday life. The socialist state distributed not only the means of production but also the means of subsistence, such as foodstuff, housing, schooling, and even the quota for childbirth. A gift economy arose within, not independent of, the socialist distributive economy, which allowed ordinary people to use guanxi to get around rules and regulations and to secure the scarce goods and get things done in a more efficient way. It is in this sense that guanxi and gift exchange, accompanied by the corpus of ethics, tactics and etiquette of the gift economy: bonds of obligation, reciprocity, and mutual aid and so on, constituted an oppositional force that could counterbalance and even subvert the state distributive mode of exchange and the principles of the strict vertical hierarchy in the Maoist era (Yang 1994a: 177-208).

When a market economy was introduced in China in the new era of Deng Xiaoping, the market forces and a still omnipresent state in many public realms throughout the 1980s did not make guanxixue disappear. As social and material resources were still limited and the state continued to operate at nearly every levels of social and economic life, the desires of Chinese people were already stirred up by a prospect of material affluence promised by the market reforms. The new "desiring subjects" (Rofel 2007) found themselves in a whole new world, where they had to compete with one another with very limited resources, and rebuild social capital that had been lost or damaged throughout the years of class struggle and political movements. It is against this socioeconomic background, that what Yang has called "a process of commodification of guanxi" and "a process of displacement" took place in urban China (Yang 1994a: 171). As a departure from the old non-monetary objectives for cultivating guanxi in the Maoist era, the guanxi subjects in the economic reform era increasingly invoked guanxi networks and gift exchange to save money, to earn money, and to create opportunities and conditions that could be transformed into monetary gains in the future. Therefore, instrumentalism is definitely one important aspect of guanxi and guanxixue in most of the 1980s, and it still is in what many scholars have called "a neoliberal era" in China today (Sigley 2006; Anagnost 2006; Rofel 2007).

Over the last decade, Chinese society has once again undergone a series of transformations in almost all spheres of social, cultural, economic and political life. These changes in the Chinese social order inevitably impact the relationship between the state and society, and that between the people, especially in the area of guanxi and the operation of social networks. Two major events that took place in the year of 1992 marked this historical watershed. First, in January 1992, Deng Xiaoping embarked on a "southern tour" to the Special Economic

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Zones of Shenzhen and Zhuhai, and on those trips he gave a series of lectures calling for a bolder approach by the Party and government in implementing reform and opening up. The second event was the official declaration of the mission of economic reform by Jiang Zemin, to construct a "socialist market economy" (*shehuizhuyi shicheng jingji*), indicating a critical shift away from a centralized state economy (Sigley 2006: 498). The concurrence of these two events created drastic transformations in urban China, which encompass a wide range of economic, political and social restructuring projects, including the reform of the system of government (*zhengfu tizhi gaige*), demise of state-run enterprises, the transfer of control over resources from central to local governments, the abolition of security in employment, the emergence of foreign investment and joint-venture companies, the housing reform and welfare reform. The list could go on, and new issues are added everyday. The so called "socialist market economy" accompanied by the subsequent economic boom was really not only about the introduction of capitalism into a socialist country in the economic sense, but also about a whole range of complex reimaginings of the local, the national, and the global on the part of both the Chinese state and its subjects, both of which increasingly produce and engage with new sorts of relationships and networks at the local, national and global levels.

This "spectralization" of the urban[12] that is caught in constant change, destruction and construction has given rise to new modalities of social life, especially in the field of social networks, interpersonal relationships and guanxi practices. Indeed, large numbers of people have been laid off from the state sectors; move into a new residential compound (*xiaoqu*) with no old acquaintances or co-workers living nearby; the Only-Child (*dusheng zinv*) generation has come of age only to find themselves carrying the burden of supporting elder parents in an increasingly

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[12] The "spectralization" of the urban is borrowed from Hairong Yan (2003), "spectralization of the rural."

competitive world; urban life no longer projects a future of prosperity, but a world of uncertainty and insecurity; and urban citizens constantly worry about such everyday issues as health care, food hygiene, air quality and crime rate. Under such circumstances, how can one develop and maintain effective and coherent networks and guanxi relationships that might maximize social capital by overcoming the familial, social, psychological and moral difficulties? How can people invoke networks to cope with everyday uncertainties as neoliberal subjects who are now responsible for their own profits and losses but also dependent on the culturally sanctioned collectivity represented by the state (Anagnost 2006; Rofel 2007)? How do people appropriate guanxi to negotiate the meaning of being a Chinese as well as a global and cosmopolitan citizen? Is it possible to imagine a new sort of guanxi accompanied by a new set of ethics, tactics and etiquette in its encounter with a "socialist-neoliberalism" (Sigley 2006)[13]? Can new guanxi practices penetrate, subvert and transform this new form of governmentality that is "at once authoritarian" and "at the same time seeking to govern … through autonomy" to a certain degree (Sigley 2006)?

Facing the steady decline in the numbers and status of state-run enterprises and the spread of the market forces, some scholars tend to sidestep the above questions by proposing that guanxi practices have declined significantly in the reform era (Guthrie 1999). In rebuttal to this line of thinking, Mayfair Yang argues that with the rise of the impersonal forces of the market rose, guanxi practices that were once used to acquire scare consumer goods and to fulfill everyday

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[13] Sigley argues that China's transition from "plan" to "market" has been accompanied by the emergence of a hybrid socialist-neoliberal form of political rationality that is "at once authoritarian in a familiar political and technocratic sense yet, at the same time, seeks to govern certain subjects, but not all, through their own autonomy" (2006: 489).

needs have indeed declined, however guanxixue has "found new territory to colonize," especially in the realm of business and the urban-industrial sphere (1994a: 167; 2002: 463). Given the guanxi cultural legacy of the Maoist era, guanxixue has entered the new order of corruption where "business interests must engage with government officials who control the means to favorable business opportunities" (Yang 2002: 465). Corruption aside, there are new everyday contexts where guanxi can be more commonly used by ordinary people, such as for finding job opportunities or getting promotions, purchasing train tickets during the holiday seasons, getting a discount at a friend's café, and entering a particular school, to name a few.

While guanxixue acquires new forms and meanings in urban China, the art of guanxi and guanxi practices figure more prominently in the rural regions of China, because "unlike in urban setting[s] where one can enjoy a movie or have a drink in a place surrounded by strangers, in village society all social and leisure activities take place among people who are connected through guanxi" (Yan 1996: 9). In contrast to the commodification of guanxi in the cities, rural guanxi practices constitute a moral world and serve as a system of social support. Yan describes several cases in which the cultivation of guanxi in village society hardly generates economic gain, but indeed empowers ordinary villagers to attain dignity and moral superiority, and gives meaning to everyday engagements and interactions (Yan 1996). In another socioeconomic context in rural Wenzhou where an indigenous ritual economy meets global capitalism, the use of guanxi and gift exchange runs counter to the rational capital accumulation in a market economy. In rural Wenzhou, gift economy takes the form of excessive generosity, collective consumption and community redistribution. Through extravagant expenditure and generous donations, rural Wenzhou people not only revived traditional kinship and lineage networks by spending money building an ancestor hall, holding an annual ritual of sacrifice, repairing key

ancestral tombs, etc., but also served as an effective mechanism counterbalancing the problems created by the inroad of global capitalism by redistributing the surplus value among rich and poor villagers and providing new avenues of employment in the field of ritual activities.

The new arenas in both urban and rural contexts into which guanxixue has shifted point to new directions in thinking about guanxixue and everyday guanxi practices in the reform era. From this vantage point, rather than conveniently announcing the "death" of the art and practice of guanxi, Yang challenges us to describe and explicate the new trajectory of the development and transformation of guanxixue, and to explore the new theoretical significance of guanxixue as it has acquired new forms and meanings in the changed socioeconomic and political post-Mao setting. Yang prompts us to think: how does guanxixue involving the exchange of favors and cultivation of personal relationships inform not only acts of corruption, but also community building that can counter the social fragmentation brought by capitalism? "What would it be like to imagine a different scenario where gift economy principles penetrate, subvert and transform capitalism? What would an alternative form of market economy look like where monetary relations are subsumed to human relations; where social status is gained not through personal accumulation, but the giving away of personal wealth; … where a sense of indebtedness haunts every material gain; where consumption is defined not as an individual spending, but a community act, like a Chinese banquet" (Yang 2002:476)? Bearing these questions in mind, I will now explore a new area that guanxixue has moved into and revived in an urban context, as a result of the cross-fertilization of travel and voluntary associations. I will describe what I argue are the ethical, (non)instrumental, and aesthetic components of donkey friend guanxi relationships. This is followed by a discussion of guanxi encounters with instrumental guanxi networks (*guanxi wang*) and capitalist principles of rational calculation and accumulation.

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Finally, I will propose that the donkey friend guanxi relationships, as a new type of guanxixue rising concomitantly with the transformed urban landscape and the commodification of traditional guanxi relations, has carved out a moral world and supporting system that empowers urban citizens to face everyday life uncertainties and insecurities, to negotiate the relationship between the state and society, and to recreate a people-to-people realm to counteract the social fragmentation brought about by neoliberal capitalism.

3.3   THE "ART" OF DONKEY FRIEND GUANXI RELATIONSHIPS

3.3.1   Travel and Voluntary Associations

The last decade has seen the decline of traditional urban communities, especially the demise of socialist work units, which formed the foundation of urban life in China from the 1950s until the 1990s (Bray 2006), and at the same time the rise of urban grassroots communities and voluntary associations in the form of clubs, forums, supporting groups, and *minjian* (folk, or people-to-people) NGOs. [14] These social organizations should be distinguished from those set up under the party-state sponsorship. On the one hand, most of them are not registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and some of them choose to register as businesses, which require minimal

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[14] Minjian NGOs here refer to voluntary, non-profit, non-registered and self-governing organizations established by ordinary citizens. The usage of NGO in China is quite different from that in the West including both the more autonomous organizations and those set up by the state. *Minjian* "NGO" is a term coined and used by ordinary citizens who set up their own social organizations without registering with and reporting to the state agencies. More on this topic will be discussed in Chapter 6.

management structure with a high degree of autonomy (Saich 2000). On the other hand, voluntary organizations are formed as bottom-up initiatives and thus forge the development of horizontal ties and a series of open-ended and translocal networks that cut through the vertical relationships found in the registered organizations that are led by the Party and checked by the state hierarchical divisions of class, rank, region and so forth.

The other distinction that should be noted is between newly emerged urban groups and traditional networks that are spontaneously formed around kinship, neighborhood, classmate and co-worker relations. While traditional guanxi networks used to draw resources from these relations centered on the concept of "familiarity" (*shou*) (Yang 1994a: 111), new sorts of social networks that emerged in these urban associations that are made up of "strangers" (*sheng ren*), in the sense that they would not have the opportunity to know one another apart from the groups they belong to. In fact, the growth of new urban groups coincides with the development of the Internet in China, and many of them only exist in cyberspace and take the form of Internet forums and electronic bulletin boards. However, the "virtual" presence of these communities does not mean they are insignificant and ephemeral in people's everyday lives. To the contrary, as many donkey friends informed me, relationships built within the circles of like-minded people from the same online groups occupy such an important position in their daily lives that they spent most of their spare time socializing with fellow group members either online or offline. Sometimes these relationships are even more "real" than familial and familiar relations as they would rather confide in fellow members than relatives, co-workers or old classmates. People caught in these new types of networks and interpersonal relationships are often referred to as "Internet friends," (*wangyou*) "donkey friends," (*lvyou*) "automobile friends," (*cheyou*) "photography friends" (*sheyou*) and so on. In contrast to the straightforward categories of

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netizens, travelers, drivers and photographers, these native terms convey a sense of fellowship, an interconnectedness of the subjects, who are not only Internet users or travel enthusiasts, but also guanxi subjects who are constantly engaged in the cultivation of personal relationships, exchange of favors, and construction of networks of trust and support among themselves and with the external world through the "bridges" built within.

There are various kinds of urban groups geared towards a wide range of interests and concerns as travel, parenting, literature, home purchase, pop singers, TV programs, films, and occasionally, politics and religion. The majority of these groups are non-political and non-profit, for since the Tiananmen demonstration in 1989, the government has tightened up its control over social organizations, particularly dissident and activist groups by workers and intellectuals (White et al 1996). At the same time, the state has realized the need to expand social intermediary organizations so as to provide urban citizens with different kinds of support that the state is unable or unwilling to provide in the reform era, and to fulfill a wide range of desires and objectives of urbanites who are increasingly caught in the "national neoliberal project"[15] (Rofel 2007). As a result, a great number of interest groups and associations focusing on consumption, lifestyle, and mass culture have prospered in China urban. The reason that I chose the donkey friend communities over other types is that organizing group trips has become an important group activity despite the different focus of each group. Traveling together allows for more communication and interaction among members than other social activities (e.g., Karaoke, dinner, etc.). No matter whether it is a photography club, a pet club or an automobile club,

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[15] Lisa Rofel argues that "neoliberalism in China is a national project about global reordering," involving remaking national public culture, making neoliberal subjects and becoming a subject of neoliberalism to support a global order (2007: 20).

members organize trips among themselves, which effectively cements their bonds of friendship and strengthens their sense of belonging. Hence, traveling freely and forming associations freely, have emerged coincidentally and have converged in such an interesting way that "donkey friend" becomes a widespread and common signifier that an urban individual can easily adopt as long as he or she becomes a member of a group. [16] The cross-fertilization of travel and association does not take place without precedents which can be found in the pilgrims' associations and the Great Linkup Movement discussed in Chapter 1. The fusion of the two - travel and association - also raises the following questions: how do travel and voluntary associations jointly give rise to the development of new social networks and interpersonal relationships? How do the principles of gift exchange, personal obligation and mutual assistance inform the ethics, tactics and etiquette of guanxi relationships among donkey friends? How does the operation of social networks by donkey friends undercut the principles of neoliberal capitalism of accumulation, rational calculation and instrumentalism? And last but not least, how do donkey friends invoke guanxi networks to create a moral community and support system in times of need?

In the following section, I will describe the changing forms of ethics, tactics and etiquette of guanxi culture and practice of the urban young people who increasingly form and participate in expanded social networks through voluntary associations in contemporary urban China. This chapter can be seen as a follow-up to Mayfair Yang's (1994a) classic work, *Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*. Yang conducted fieldwork on the phenomenon of guanxixue in 1981 when China had just recently embarked on the reforms and began to recuperate from the social chaos brought by a series of social movements since the

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[16] For example, more than one of my donkey friend informants admitted that they previously belonged to a pet-owner group, a film critic club, or a reading club and they regularly organized trips and outings.

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1950s. Her work thoroughly describes the logic and mechanics of guanxixue in the context of a centralized distributive economy[17] and convincingly presented it as a subversive force against the centralized state, forming the fabric of an incipient civil society in post-Mao China. Yang uses three distinct yet interacting categories: ethics, tactics, and etiquette, to tease out the "dialects" of guanxixue and to demonstrate the dynamics of this social phenomenon (1994a: 109).

Taking this as my point of departure, I will discuss the ethical, (non)instrumental and aesthetic aspects of guanxi relationships that emerge among donkey friends. Unlike guanxixue in Chinese urban society two decades earlier, new urban guanxi networks no longer draw primary guanxi from a world of the familiars (*shouren*), but expand its bases to include "strangers" (*shengren*) who share no intersections in everyday life. I will show that these guanxi relations are not solely based on "ascribed" familiarity. They do, however, depend to a great degree on "achieved familiarity" (Yang 1994a: 125) through belonging to the same group, sharing the same interests, joining the same journey, following the same linguistic and behavior codes and so forth. Lacking ascribed familial and familiar bonds, new guanxi subjects seem to enjoy a "duty-free" relationship in which *renqing* (human feelings) ethics of obligation and indebtedness play a less important role than such principles as equality (*pingdeng*), mutual aid (*huzhu*), and voluntary dedication (*fengxian*). Although these principles, accompanied by the behavioral codes and common attitudes carried out by participants to suppress any self-seeking motivations, seem to weaken the bonds of obligation and instrumental calculations that are important dimensions of traditional guanxixue. I argue that new guanxi networks within urban voluntary groups are not

[17] Yang dedicated one section in Chapter 4 to the changing modalities and operation of guanxixue in a market economy.

formed independent of traditional gift exchange and guanxi networks, and new guanxi subjects strategically negotiate the meanings of "guanxi" and move flexibly from one to another network in order to gain material, emotional and psychological support in everyday life. Rather than replacing traditional guanxixue, new guanxi practices within voluntary groups have carved out a moral space where members are able to achieve the dignity, self-confidence, and self-respect which they might lose in traditional and commodified guanxi relations and transactions. They can also mobilize effective support and assistance in time of need without appealing to the costly means of *renqing* or monetary exchanges.

3.3.2   New Guanxi Bases: Make Friends with Strangers

As I have already mentioned, a donkey friend relationships are not based on traditional guanxi ties like family and kinship, neighbors, classmates and co-workers, but are largely formed in both cyberspace and travel spaces among like-minded people who do not know one another apart from these contexts. What bonds them together is "achieved" familiarity through shared interests, lifestyles, tastes, linguistic and behavioral codes. From her observation twenty years ago, Yang pointed out that in large cities kinship was no longer the main basis for the cultivation of guanxi relationships (1994a: 113). Like her informants, the urban people I met also complained that dealing with kin is too complicated (*fuza*), but after that they often added that dealing with classmates, co-workers or other sorts of "familiar people" (*shuren*) (e.g. people who grew up together or people from the same native place) is no less complicated or troublesome (*mafan*) because they are often caught up in competition and comparison, in terms of job opportunities, salary levels, purchasing homes, marriage conditions, and so on.

This negative attitude toward kin and old familiar relations is one result of a series of socioeconomic restructurings that swept China urban in the last decade. First of all, a generation that consists primarily of singletons due to the "One-Child Policy"[18] has come of age at the dawn of the 21st century. They do not have the supporting networks of siblings, together with the extended networks of siblings' classmates and co-workers, all of which constituted important bases for guanxi practices in previous generations. At the same time, this age cohort has been caught up in the increasingly competitive world of education and job market. Unlike the graduates who were assigned a job by the state in the planned economic system of the socialist period, young students of today face lifelong competition from the kindergarten, to college, and to job market. [19] To become a "high quality" talent (*gao suzhi rencai*) of the new century, means competing for high salary jobs, social security, and cosmopolitan lifestyles. Such goals require competing with classmates to enter college, competing with people from the same native place for limited urban job quotas[20], and competing with co-workers for job promotions and salary raises. The constant and ruthless competition in everyday encounters does not necessarily negate the existence of friendship and loyalty among classmates, co-workers and other familiar persons, but it has provided a condition and a rationale for young urbanites to seek extra and external

[18] The Chinese state enforced the family planning and One-Child Policy at the end of 1970s with a purpose of controlling population growth, improving the quality (*suzhi*) of Chinese people, and achieving the modernization. A detailed ethnographic analysis of the One-Child Policy can be found at *Only Hope* by Vanessa L. Fong (2004).

[19] In the early 1980s, the Education Commission initiated a series of reforms in the assignment system, followed by changes in university enrolment policies and curriculum (Hoffman 2006).

[20] Job quota is a college policy to control how many graduates from outside the city can obtain the local household legitimately and look for a job in the city. Usually this quota is important for students of Beijing colleges who intend to stay in Beijing.

supporting resources by creating social networks and guanxi relationships that reach beyond their immediate familiar and familial circles and contexts.

Most donkey friends I met were born around or after 1980 and are singletons, due to the One-Child policy. Their social networks, apart from the donkey friend communities, are often simple and straightforward. Beijing natives often, but not always, have larger guanxi networks than those from outside of Beijing. The latter either work or study in Beijing while their relatives, class/schoolmates or friends still remain in their native place. Even for Beijing natives, classmates and childhood friends are not always available due to the increasing geographical and economic mobility of urbanites; people change jobs and even change residences more easily and thus more frequently than before. A similar scene can be observed in the West at the turn of the twentieth century, which has been a driving force motivating modern tourists to travel (MacCannell 1976). MacCannell argues that modern society is characterized by "alienation," "fragmentation," and "artificiality," and to cope with the "inauthentic" experience of modern life, modern tourists attempt to discover and reconstruct a more "authentic" world and more "coherent" system of relations outside their working and living environment (1976: 1-14). By the same token, Chinese urbanites are experiencing drastic transitions, and the old social order and social networks are now increasingly fragmented and losing hold. As a result, new social groups are formed. Through the activity of travel, Chinese urban donkey friends seek to reconstruct a coherent and meaningful world.

In contrast to fragmented networks attached to older types of guanxi relations, donkey friend communities have become a new repertoire of open-ended, fluid and expanding guanxi resources where one can conveniently find someone to talk to or travel with. One woman I met from the Cherokee Team told me that it was difficult to find someone to travel with before she

joined the team, because her friends always had different time schedules; but it had become easy now since there were hundreds of team members and there is always someone who shares her schedule. The flexibility and large numbers of guanxi resources aside, the fact that donkey friend guanxi relations go beyond the immediate competitive environment and are thus devoid of the conflicts of interest found in everyday encounters is another important factor that draws people to donkey friend communities.

Donkey friends form voluntary associations through achieved familiarity. Their bonds are strengthened by their shared interests in travel. Although this familiarity is only achieved and nurtured after donkey friends join the same group, it is no less effective than ascribed familiarity to make people feel a sense of fellowship and belonging. More than one donkey friend told me about their first contact with fellow members in various contexts, and all of them expressed the feeling that they did not feel strange (*mosheng*), but had the feeling of finally coming home (*huijia*). One of the reasons behind this strong sense of belonging can be attributed to their constant reference to familial and familiar relationships. Donkey friends use ascribed, rather than achieved, guanxi principles to inform their relationships and guide their interactions. For example, within donkey friend communities, members address one another by invoking the terms used for familial or familiar relations such as kinship terms *jie* (elder sister), *mei* (younger sister), *ge* (elder brother), *di* (younger brother), terms used for class/schoolmate and co-workers, *tongxue* (classmate), *lingdao* (leader), *duizhang* (team leader), and so on. Although they have no ascribed kinship or other familiar relations, strangers are immediately drawn closer by the way they are addressed as members of a family or a familiar person in a shared context.

MM (younger sister), and GG (older brother) are two of the most common terms of address for donkey friends. In spite of age difference, all females are MM and all males are GG.

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As most donkey friends are singletons, they do not have brothers or sisters in their everyday lives. Many donkey friends expressed envy of those who grow up with siblings and men admitted their secret wish to have a little sister to look after, and women for an older brother to rely on. These kinship terms adopted by donkey friends resonate with their personal desires for siblings. They bring strangers into a fictive family, along with implied familial responsibilities and obligations that guide their ideas, behavior, and interactions. For instance, donkey friends are well aware of the obligations of GGs or MMs on a trip. "Silver", another girl I met in the Cherokee Team told me, "usually GGs will take over the heavy-duty tasks such as fetching water, setting up tents, driving and pushing the broken cars, while MMs will take care of food preparation, cleaning up, laundry and other housework. If we need to camp, it is unquestionably GG who will carry the tents and carry the heavy goods such as the wok, BBQ racks, and coal. "

The fictive ascribed relations among donkey friends not only draw strangers closer but can also be seen as a critique of the commodification of familiar guanxi relations and the erosion of traditional gender roles and relations. The gendered division of labor between GG and MM can be seen as performed gender roles that endorse these "ascribed" terms with particular significance by contesting and negotiating the meanings of what constitute masculinity and femininity. Although they seemingly retreat into the traditional gender stereotypes of "men taking care of the outside business while women take care of the domestic chores" (*nan zhu wai, nv zhu nei*), gender roles adopted by male and female donkey friends in fact can be read as a critique of the neoliberal imagination of masculinity and femininity. Under the market reform, a neoliberal subject has to be responsible for his or her gain and loss regardless of one's gender. The "iron women" of the Mao era have been replaced by new post-socialist models, "strong women," "independent women," "woman entrepreneurs," "woman managers," who nevertheless

share a de-gendered identity with their predecessors. By contrast, GG and MM are distinguished solely by their gender regardless of age, generation, education and occupational differences. All males are referred to as elder brothers and all females are younger sisters. Within this fictive family, a man who has just lost his job can still take on a "masculine" role and take care of the females, and likewise a woman who has just had a promotion to manager can still take on a "feminine" role and be taken care of. Among the women I met in the donkey friend communities, they confided to me that they felt "more like a woman" in a "donkey friend" environment than on their office floors, because male donkey friends knew how to treat women better than their male colleagues. When I posted the questions about the connotations of GG and MM to male donkey friends, they often adopted a light-hearted tone and seemed to take it for granted that men should be "in charge" of the heavy work and held responsible for important decision making. Some of them told me that in a working environment, they would just mind their own business without bothering to assist their female colleagues, but in the circles of donkey friends, they felt responsible for taking care of their fellow female donkey friends, because, they are women!

Donkey friend guanxi relations are based on "achieved" familiarity among strangers but nevertheless appropriate the ascribed relations to create the sense of fellowship and belonging. They adopt familial and familiar terms to address one another and endow those terms with new symbolic meanings. One example can be found in the case of GG and MM, in which donkey friends evoke idealized gender roles that can no longer be found in a more competitive and de-gendered neoliberal world. Unlike real familial and familiar relationships that have been increasingly eroded by instrumentality and utilitarianism under the market economy, the "fictive" ascribed relations between GG and MM do not generate immediate economic and

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material gains, but provide people with psychological and emotional support and consolation that is missing from their everyday lives. Therefore, at a time when both the "primary" form of guanxi – guided more by renqing ethics, and extended form of guanxi – guided more by economic exchange calculations (Yan 1996: 22), fail to give meaning to everyday engagements, interactions and transactions, Chinese urban youth increasingly seek new guanxi resources and build up guanxi alliances with "strangers" from outside of their close-knit communities to give meaning to the life they live and to construct a more meaningful sense of personhood.

3.3.3 Donkey Friend Guanxi Ethics

Yang has teased out three distinct but overlapping cultural discourses – *yiqi* (personal loyalty), *ganqing* (affective feeling), and *renqing* (human feeling) – that guide and give meaning to interpersonal interactions and transactions of Chinese people (1994a: 121). Yiqi often refers to personal commitment and loyalty attached to friendship, and ganqing stresses emotional and affective feelings, often between a parent and child, husband and wife and close friends. Unlike yiqi and ganqing that only apply to a limited number of social networks, renqing principles that guide the exchange of favors penetrate every level of interpersonal relationships and bind every guanxi subject with its ethics and etiquette in Chinese society. In practice, the three affective elements do not necessarily co-exist in each personal relationship, but rather their different combinations give different meanings and significance to different relationships. Yang observed in her fieldwork that while the art of guanxi drew on certain elements from yiqi and ganqing discourses, it was "embedded in the renqing formulation of human relations as an endless flow of interpersonal exchange and reciprocal commitments" (1994a: 122).

This study of voluntary urban associations has noticed that while the renqing principles still rein in everyday guanxi relationships and social interactions, it has loosened its supreme grip on the new sorts of guanxi relationships among Chinese urbanites who have come to know one another, make friends, and interact through newly found social networks and urban groups. Unlike the renqing ethics that bind people with reciprocal obligations, new behavior codes and ethics have been developed precisely for the purpose of "shaking off" the heavy burdens of renqing and breaking away from the "disingenuous" (*xujia*) and "hypocritical" (*xuwei*) instrumental networks of guanxixue. During the course of my fieldwork, many donkey friends impressed on me how they tried to intentionally set donkey friend relationships apart from everyday guanxi relations. For example, one donkey friend advised me, "never use donkey friend relationships as a platform (*tiaoban*) to pull guanxi (*la guanxi*), nor bring everyday guanxi relations to this circle, otherwise people will take you as having ulterior motives (*you qitu*)."

Breaking loose from the renqing ethics, donkey friend relationships have drawn on more ingredients from yiqi and ganqing discourses. "Dan" (web ID), one of the organizers of the Travel and Photography Club told me what she thought about donkey friend relations. "We are special kinds of friend. Many of us are strangers in a practical sense, but we trust each other and hold one another accountable. The base of this loyalty (*zhongcheng*) and ganqing is something we share in common like values, beliefs, and interests." Cultural elements of yiqi and ganqing evoked by Dan are often used by donkey friends to distinguish their relationship from traditional guanxixue. In fact, more than one donkey friends remarked that they tend not to do business with fellow donkey friends because it would contaminate (*dianwu*) the relationship and jeopardize one's membership in a group.

The decline of the renqing ethics in donkey friend relationships is also reflected in the practice of the AA system (*AA zhi*), which was first adopted by donkey friends to make the organization of a trip easier, and now has become a universal principle that guides the socializing of urban youth outside the "familiar" circles. In their statement about the Lvye Outdoor Association, the founders explicate the AA system as followed:

> "The AA system refers to the equal sharing principle that applies to all activities initiated and organized by one or several donkey friends. More than a principle in the field of economic transaction, the AA system also represents the equal relations among all the members. Thus all Lvye members are equal in terms of rights, obligations and dignity. As long as they obey the rules, everyone has the freedom to express their opinions and everyone's opinions should be respected."

An important message which is conveyed through this statement about the AA system is that, no renqing exchange (along with its moral obligations and indebtedness) should be incurred, nor is it necessary. To the founders of the Lvye, "all Lvye members are equal in terms of rights, obligations and dignity," but renqing ethics entail constant competition and comparison, and will eventually threaten the equality, freedom and rights of their members. Even though everyday life is governed by renqing principles and economic calculations, Lvye members should transcend all these regulations and restrictions; if one gives a favor, s/he should not expect the return of the favor, and if one receives a favor, s/he should not feel the obligation to repay.

My first contact with the AA system in mainland China took place on a weekend trip I joined with a group of donkey friends to mountain climb in a Beijing suburb. We climbed for several hours before we reached the top. We did not follow the road built for tourists, but

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approach the mountain from the other side where few tourists were in view and there were hardly any visible climbing trails. When we finally dragged our legs to the top of the mountain, we found ourselves in a place where not a single tourist was in sight, nor any tourist facilities, such as restaurants. Before I could take a breath and enjoy the view from the top, the "lead donkey" (*toulv*: organizer) led us to a small stone house, which turned out to be the home of the mountain watchman and his wife. Like a fairytale, the watchman and his wife greeted us warmly and led us to a table where bowls of noodles and plates of preserved pickles were already prepared. As I wondered whether the noodles and pickles were offered to us for free, like the scenario in a fairytale, someone took out 5 Yuan (less than $1) and put it on the table, and others followed suit. It took me by surprise because the host did not refuse the monetary offering, and neither did anyone from our group stood up and offer to pay for all. This might not seem uncommon in America, but definitely seemed odd in China, where it is common after a meal to see people compete, sometimes violently kicking each other and grabbing the bill, to pay the check for everyone else. I later learned that the watchman did not refuse the payment because the "lead donkey" had persuaded him to accept it in advance. Others had not competed to be the "host" because they simply followed the AA system.

Yang has observed that banqueting in Chinese culture constitutes one important tactic in conducting guanxi and renqing practices in both everyday life and in the business world. "Throwing banquets and giving gifts" (*qingke songli*) are two important activities that are used to accumulate gift/renqing capital and to incur moral obligations and indebtedness (1994a: 138 – 139). Both hosts and guests are subject to the similar binding obligations in that hosts need to show generosity and "face" by throwing lavish banquets while guest should bring appropriate gifts that match the occasion and the relationship with the hosts. These obligations and

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considerations seem to have all of a sudden become unimportant and unnecessary. If every participant shares the costs under the AA system, no one is indebted to anyone, nor are they under pressure to compete to be the host.

When I asked Jeep Girl what she thought about this seemingly "impersonal and detached" transaction practiced by donkey friends, especially when compared with "giving a banquet" in renqing contexts, Jeep Girl expressed obvious contempt toward traditional renqing practices:

> "Renqing guanxi is a bad element in Chinese culture, and everyone is stressed out by renqing practices. No matter whether it is a classmates' reunion or a colleagues' gathering, there is always a person who wants to beat the others by being the host and treating everyone. In so doing, s/he can gain 'face' (*mianzi*) and let others feel indebted to him/her. One of the ill effects of this practice is that everyone competes with one another, and the unfortunate ones will feel self-pity and not come to the gathering again, so that they do not have to be indebted to the wealthy ones. Unlike the traditional way of giving a banquet, donkey friends share everything, no matter whether it is a dinner or gasoline expenses on a trip. Everyone puts down, say, twenty Yuan for a dinner no matter how rich or how poor they are. It makes one feel equal."

"Equal," "disinterested and "non-instrumental" are a few words that appeared repeatedly in donkey friends' descriptions of their relationships. Examples of mutual help and voluntary dedication are also often invoked to support the characterization of the "non-instrumental" and "non-utilitarian" spirit in which donkey friends take great pride. Jeep Girl from the Cherokee Team had a regular job in a publishing house. She joined the team because she liked to travel and she drove a Cherokee. As an active member of the team, she was recognized as one of the most

warmhearted and trustworthy persons in the team. One story I heard about her is that she volunteered to help her fellow members register for the radio license test. CB radio is an important tool for Cherokee Team members because it is heavily used for communication, information exchange, and road rescue among the members. But like most of the qualification tests in China, applications for the use of CB radios involves a large amount of paperwork and complicated bureaucratic processes. Jeep Girl posted a notice on the forum, volunteering to help those who were busy preparing for the test. More than forty people responded; she ended up helping them to fill out the registration forms, turning in their ID photos and registration fees and getting the study materials after spending a long time standing in the line outside the registrars office of the Radio Association. When I asked her why she helped her fellow team members, she told me:

> "I felt the joy of working for the team, the joy you could never get from working in a work unit. In the work unit, I would not feel like volunteering to do any extra jobs because my colleagues always think that I am competing with them and they are afraid that I am trying to get a promotion for what I do. The work environment is just too complicated (*fuza*). However, here (on the team) I do not get paid nor do I get any benefit for what I do; everyone is aware of that so they do not feel threatened by or indebted to me. What I did was all voluntary and spontaneous, and I was filled with joy afterward. That joy I could only feel when I help someone out of spontaneity and good will, but not out of instrumentalism (*gongli zhuyi*)."

Despite receiving no material payment for what she did, Jeep Girl admitted that her voluntary behavior did gain her some more important things, such as group recognition, prestige, trust, friendship, and later, love from her future husband. It is in this sense that the voluntary

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dedication extolled among donkey friends is not so much breaking away from renqing exchange and instrumental guanxi practices as it gives rise to another kind of social exchange and instrumental transaction based on the accumulation of symbolic capital rather than merely building on economic and social capital. From a rational economic perspective, the act of spending time, strength and money (if considering transportation expenses to and from the office of the Radio Association) for someone total strangers without generating any immediate material gain is absolutely irrational, lacks sensible calculation, and is a waste of time. However, viewed from the perspective of a gift economy, Jeep Girl's conduct is perfectly understandable, because her generosity towards her fellow teammates won her symbolic and social capital in the form of group recognition, prestige, let alone the heart of her future husband. In this case, "gift" exchange took place primarily between different forms of symbolic capital. Another example will demonstrate how the exchange also occurs between economic capital and symbolic capital. Redistribution of wealth between rich and poor donkey friends, a form of exchange and redistribution similar to the Native American potlatch, took place among donkey friends in spite of the existence of the AA system.

"Silver," a female donkey friend I met in the Cherokee Team once told me a story:

"I met a couple on an ordinary outing activity. They impressed me because they bought along a large quantity of food, drinks, and also brought their own Barbecue racks, woks and feul so that we could cook outside. Because of the AA system, each of us was supposed to only bring our own portion, put them together and then share. But apparently this couple brought more than their share; we only found out later that they had spent over one thousand Yuan preparing all the food and drinks! Someone offered to split the cost with them, but they refused and told us not to take it too seriously. In fact, this kind

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of generous spending is not uncommon on our team. For example, my team members let me share their stove and gas without charging me a rental fees, they give me a rides without asking me to split the cost of gasoline, and every time we share food no one really calculates who brought what. You just enjoy the pleasure of the sharing afterward."

Like the participants in the Native American potlatch who displayed exaggerated generosity for prestige and honor, the donkey friends who bought an unusually large amount of food and shared it with fellow members without asking for the AA split also received the gratitude, respect, and trust from their team members. Unlike the mere economic exchange of material goods, these activities were carried out in a disinterested way, with the aim to showing generosity and voluntary dedication. If traditional guanxi is prominent in Chinese society because it entails explicit renqing exchange in a gift economy in the form of throwing a banquet or giving gifts accompanied by the moral obligation to receive the gifts and reciprocate, renqing ethics are less obvious and straightforward in the practice of the AA principles because they are accompanied by the highly exalted values of disinterestedness and voluntariness. However, the guanxi relationships and interactions of donkey friends resemble Mauss' "total social phenomena" in which gift exchange in traditional societies are at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, and ethical; gift relations that are in theory voluntary, but in reality are reciprocated with obligation (1990: 3). The spontaneous and voluntary behaviors of donkey friends are non-instrumental and disinterested in the economic sense because their transactions do not generate any economic and material gain, but they must be reciprocated with respect, gratitude and prestige. The generous expenditure of the couple in the abovementioned story testified to the logics of gift exchange in that the couple showed the generosity by giving, the members received their "gifts" and returned the "favors" with respect and gratitude toward the couple. It is not

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renqing ethics in the narrow sense because the couple did not return the "gift" with material favors or economic gain, but in the broader sense the traditional Chinese renqing principle still applies, as is explicitly expressed in the following Chinese idiom:

If you eat from other people's bowl, your mouth becomes soft;

If you take from other people's bag, your hands become short. (*chi ren zui ruan*, *na ren shou duan*)

The indebtedness expressed in this idiom generates a sense of inferiority on the part of receivers in terms of social status, power and rights, while the givers enjoy the privilege of imposing the authority and influence over the receivers. It is in this sense that donkey friend relationships are not as disinterested or non-instrumental as they are claimed to be. They might be disinterested in the economic world, but not so in the moral and social world. What's more, donkey friends do believe that their generous giving, which is practiced in order to gain recognition and respect, is still nobler than the mere economic exchanges in the renqing and business world. Therefore their practices often entail a very different set of tactics and etiquette from those of renqing practices in traditional guanxi exchanges.

3.3.4 The Tactics and Etiquette of Making Donkey Friends

I have already described how outright exchange of gifts and favors are very rare and considered too utilitarian and insincere among donkey friends. What is important about cultivating interpersonal relations among donkey friends is to gain emotional, psychological, and social support, which are increasingly difficult to acquire from other types of social networks based on kinship, work, or place of residence. It follows that guanxi relations of donkey friends at the same time constitute a moral world in which every "donkey" needs to learn how to be a proper

donkey friend, how to interact with fellow members, and how to establish him or herself as a "trustworthy donkey" within the community boundaries. In Chapter 2, I discussed how to enter a community and obtain recognition and acceptance drawing from my own experiences and those of Jeep Girl. In this Chapter, I focus on the cultivation of mutual support (*huzhu*) and mutual trust (*xinren*).

Unlike guanxi transactions and gift exchanges that are based on dyadic relations (Yang 1994a: 125), social interactions and exchanges within donkey friend communities are rather diffused and decentered. Traditional guanxi networks are composed of a series of guanxi chains (*guanxi lian*) in which each person will only be indebted to the person to whom she or he made a request. However in donkey friend relationships, very often, the person who performs a favor does not know the receiver of the favor in person, and the latter will not be indebted to the former because all favors should be given voluntarily.

The mutual trust embedded in these transactions does not come from personal familiarity, but from the intermediary of the community and the fellowship they share in that community. The logic behind this is illustrated in what Dan (whom I quoted earlier) said about her feeling toward the fellow members of the Club: "Since you are a member of the Club, even if I don't know you in person, I will immediately trust you and feel close to you, because I take it that we must share the same interests and values, and we must know the same group of people." "Besides," she continued, "We should care about one another; help one another as much as possible, because we are a big family." As one does not help one's brothers or sisters with the expectation of receiving repayment, one should also help his or her fellow members voluntarily and selflessly.

This principle guides the social interactions of donkey friends, in which one can seek support from any fellow member without incurring indebtedness to that specific individual, but later on one should give favors to others who will make requests as well. The Cherokee Team offers a good example to illustrate this kind of interaction. The team's Cherokee jeeps all have the automobile radios installed for real-time communication and emergency rescue. It should be noted that while a growing number of Chinese people have come to own their private cars, the road rescue system in urban China is still underdeveloped and very pricey. The Cherokee Team was formed to facilitate self-drive trips (*zijia you*), and it has soon developed into a supporting system that cultivated various forms of mutual support among its members. One example is that if one's car breaks down on the road, she or he can call for help through the radio, and soon team members who hear the call through their radios will immediately come to help. "Thorpe" (web ID), a team member, illustrated this further:

> "It happened to me several times. For example, a team member called for help through the radio, and my work unit happened to be around his location. I picked up the tools and went to him immediately. I fixed the problem for him and drove back to work. It is not uncommon to see several cars rushing to the same location after they hear the S.O.S message on the radio. I think the basis of our relationship is the mutual help. I might have not met the person, or might have only spoken with that person on the radio a few times, but if she or he is in trouble, I will go straight to help her or him, and then we are still ordinary friends and no one is indebted to anyone."

Agreeing with Thorpe, Jeep Girl talked about her experience, "if my car has broken down, the first thing that occurs to me is definitely not the Continental Rescue Center, but the Cherokee Team. I will call them by phone or simply call for help through the radio."

The support system can be expanded to everyday lives, but again the favor should be given voluntarily and completely free of charge. The principle that there should be no economic exchange and no one owes the other a favor still applies. When I asked Jeep Girl if they would help one another outside the community, she gave me a positive answer, "Sure. We will inform one another of job opportunities, cheap services and good deals. You see this café (where we had this talk)? Because its owner is a team member, we helped him design and decorate the café free of charge."

In fact, in order to distinguish donkey friend relationships from traditional guanxi relationships, great care is often taken not to get involved in any economic transactions or direct exchange of favors in a dyadic relation. Certain etiquette and polite rituals are evident in these social transactions. One example is that a favor cannot be offered to achieve profit or another favor, but it should incur gratitude and respect. Therefore while it is embarrassing to offer any material payment to the person who gives you the favor, it is appropriate to write a thank you note on the website and give the person credit. It is in this way that the favor has been exchanged for something that is really important to a donkey friend – recognition, respect, and reputation.

More care should be taken when sometimes social interactions indeed involve economic exchange and material gain. The Cherokee Team and other cyberspace communities, for example, are capable of gathering a large number of people in one place, they thus provide businesses with potential customers and guanxi networks. There are people who sell a variety of products ranging from outdoor equipment to comic books within donkey friend communities. Thorpe, for instance, often took trips between China and Singapore, and he took the opportunity to buy outdoor clothing for a lower price in Singapore and sold them to the Cherokee Team members back in China. I asked him if his business with the team breached the relationship with

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his fellow members, he said, "I don't think so. First of all, I'm not selling these clothing for a huge profit, and secondly our transactions are transparent in terms of cost and profit. In fact, it's a way to 'serve the people' because they cannot buy these clothes at such low prices in China. After all, it is not for money, but it is for fun."

Although Thorpe spoke with confidence, I could see that he was trying to rationalize his doing business with fellow team members. He used the fact that the transactions produced "little" profit and in actuality served the people's needs to mask or mute the instrumental nature of his behavior, and to distinguish it from guanxi practices in business world. To conduct business in everyday life, it is normal and socially acceptable for sellers to invest in useful guanxi chains in order to sell and make a profit. However, the same behavior, when taking place in donkey friend communities, is regarded as unacceptable and despicable.

When discussing the principles to conduct business within the Team, "Silver", another team member, said that one had to know the boundary: "I can understand if you want to do something for your own good by using the social networks built through the team, but you cannot go beyond the limits of my tolerance." I continued to ask her where the limit is and what is acceptable and unacceptable. She thought for a while, and answered, "Everyone likes a good deal. It is Okay if you sell some stuff of really good quality and at a really low prices. But if you want to make a profit from it, then you have to let everyone know. Otherwise it will be considered cheating, especially when a buyer finds out afterwards."

Silver's opinion echoes the point made by Thorpe: even the economic transactions between donkey friends should be nobler and dealt with more graciously than the undertakings of traditional renqing exchange and guanxi practices. In both economic and non-economic interactions of donkey friends, crude instrumentality and utilitarianism should be avoided, or at

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least disguised. Voluntary offers of help to fellow members are an important tactic to establish social relationships and to achieve recognition and reputations within donkey friend communities. Without incurring the obligation to repay, donkey friend social transactions are different from rationalized and impersonal exchange relations of capitalism; nor do they follow the pattern of traditional renqing exchange that is instrumentally motivated. Donkey friends view their relationships as purer (*chunjie*), more genuine (*zhenshi*) and more sincere (*zhencheng*) than those involving everyday guanxi relationships. The ethics and principles of donkey friend relations constitute a moral world in which the cultivation of social networks does not serve the economic functions so much as provide social, moral and emotional support. The complex tactics and etiquette of engaging in various interactions and transactions between donkey friends suggest that although it is instrumental in the sense that generous offerings of favors can be exchanged for social and symbolic capital, it is not a totally calculated or rationalized pattern of conduct. This shows that when guanxi relations have been increasingly embedded in a market economy and have become mainly means of getting things done, and when renqing, ganqing, and other emotional feelings are reduced to exchangeable resources, guanxi subjects will seek alternative resources for emotional and social support by forming alliances and fellowship with like-minded people outside of their everyday contexts. The cultivation of interpersonal relationships in this form is part of the cultural construction of a public sphere that can be separate from the state and empower the individuals to practice democratic values and take collective actions, as will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

4.0   TELL YOUR STORY: TRAVEL NARRATIVES, SELF AND IDENTITY

In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going (Charles Taylor, *Source of the Self*, quoted in Giddens, 1991: 54).

In his "Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov", Walter Benjamin lamented that the role of storyteller has become remote from us, and that storytelling, or the ability to exchange experiences, has been taken from us (1968). At the very beginning, a storyteller is embodied in the trading seaman; someone comes from afar, goes on a trip and must have something to tell about; a storyteller "takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (Benjamin 1968: 84-87). Travel is in this sense grounded in discourse and storytelling. It cannot be separated from language, interpersonal communication and rhetoric, which have worked together to construct personal and collective identities (Dann 1996; Noy 2004). Travelers always tell their stories as a way of writing a biography that tells of the self and of identity (Noy 2004; Elsrud 2001). This chapter deals with how donkey friends write about their travel experiences, how they relate these stories to their desires, values and newly found subjectivities under a market economy, and how these narratives serve to constitute a new social space where participation, sharing, and articulations of tastes, values, and lifestyles are all indispensable to the construction of a self and collective identity.

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4.1   NARRATIVES AND IDENTITIES OF TRAVELERS

Travel, especially backpacker travel, has been increasingly recognized as a new sort of mobility, a representation of a lifestyle, and an expression of identity. In Cohen's seminal work on the "drifter", he characterized a drifter as a traveler who was "an individualist, disdainful of ideologies…, at best un-patriotic…hedonistic and often anarchistic" (1973:92). Cohen's typology of a "drifter" reflects the emergence of an affluent middle class in the West. In a similar vein, MacCannell suggested that his readers "follow the tourist" in order to understand the nature of modern identity (1976: 5). His travelers are "mainly middle-class… deployed throughout the entire world in search of experience" (MacCannell 1976: 1). A modern middle class traveler is a person who cannot achieve satisfaction and a sense of integrity at home due to the fragmentation and alienation of modern capitalist society. Therefore such a person develops an interest in the "real life" of others, and seeks to regain his sense of authenticity and integrity in his journeys away from home. Both Cohen and MacCannell see modern travel as a structural symptom of modernity and capitalism, and as an expression of broader alienating forces current among western youth.

In contrast to Cohen's description of young travelers as "hippies," "bums," or adherents of "counter-culture," Riley (1988) points out that significant changes have taken place regarding young travelers' identities since the 1980s. She depicts them

> as likely to be middle class, at a juncture in life, somewhat older than the earlier travelers on average, college educated, and not aimless drifters. They travel under flexible timetables and itineraries. Most expect to rejoin the work force in the society they left (Riley 1988:326).

Supporting Riley's observation, Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995) further identify a number of common characteristics of backpackers that emerged in the 1990s, including high levels of interaction with hosts and thus the search for "more authentic" travel experiences, low levels of organization, and the use of low cost, less comfortable facilities. Travelers are usually young and highly independent. All of these studies strive to explore the identities, motivations and behaviors of modern Western travelers in general, and backpackers in particular. In addition, a number of studies have observed the intensive patterns of sociality and interpersonal communication networks often established and engaged in by travelers on the road (Cohen 1973; Vogt 1976; Riley 1988; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995). For example, Cohen has long recognized that "information flows by word-of-mouth from the experienced travelers to the newcomers" (1973: 96). Riley points out that the network of communication among travelers is "a salient feature of budget travel… budget travelers quickly establish friendships and are continually discussing the 'best' places to visit… a great deal of information is passed on via word-of-mouth and many of the latest 'in' spots are only communicated in this way" (1988: 322-324). Stressing the importance of the networks of interpersonal communication of travelers, Cohen and Riley did not discuss the languages and narratives unique to travelers and backpackers, let alone the implications of travelers' storytelling on the construction of self and collective identities. However, a traveler, be he or she a trading seaman in the past, or a backpacker in the twenty-first century, always has his or her story to tell. Travelogues written, photos taken, souvenirs collected, lectures given, and casual talks with friends, are all part of the story travelers tell about themselves, to relate to places and relate to communities.

Since the late 1990s, there have been an increasing number of studies devoted to the ways in which travelers recount their trips, and produce narratives of self and collective identity

(Desforges 1998; Elsrud 2001; Noy 2004). In her study of long-term independent travelers from Western societies to Thailand, Elsrud found that risk and adventure have emerged as significant themes in travelers' writings. Through this risk and adventure narrative, traveling individuals, the narrators, are able to construct and express their idiosyncratic identities as brave, adventurous and passionate persons living in a "real" and "natural" world (2001). Relating her observations to Giddens' notion of self-identity as a "self-reflexive project", Elsrud sees that every traveler is a narrator of identity: "the clothes one wears, the job one gets, the music one listens to, the people one socializes with, etc., are from such a perspective part of a narrative about identity – just as the choice to go traveling is" (2001: 600).

Elsrud points out that a traveling narration is not produced without some sort of manuscript, or "grand narratives of traveling," that "work as systems of beliefs which unite people in some sort of common understanding about reality" (600). She further proposes that the very progress of Western society has provided historical background for the grand narrative of risk and adventure. A society aiming to progress relies on continual exploration and needs people who are daring, drawn to novelty and change, and able to cope successfully with risk. It is in this sense that, through their tales and acts, Western travelers actively and creatively use risks as constituent ingredients in individual self-presentations to construct "strong characters" of modern society (2001: 602-603).

In a similar vein, Noy explored Israeli backpackers' travel narratives, and found that a profound self-change is consistently recounted in those narratives (2004). He saw Israeli youths' participation in an extended trip as a collective rite-of-passage. With a decline in the traditional role of military service in the adolescent psychic-social development of Israeli youth, Noy argues that they feel a need for separation, and the lengthy trip effectively satisfies this need (2004: 82).

Noy argues that by participating in a trip, travelers gain a variety of cultural capital which serve to admit them to enter certain professions, a subculture, a community, "thereby giving them a valid claim for a collective identity" (82).

Besides viewing travelers' storytelling as a way to express their self and collective identity, Munt, drawing upon the work of Bourdieu on taste and class, sees contemporary travel and travelers' narratives as part of a process of distinction, in which today's western youth can "stoke up on cultural capital" and distinguish themselves as a new middle class" (1994: 109). In line with Munt's argument, Desforges looks at how British travelers "collect" "Third World" places and use them as cultural capital to narrate their new identities upon their return to Britain (1998). Through "collecting places," travelers can frame the "Third World" to be collected, and as a place where knowledge and experience can be gained. The knowledge, and experience, along with souvenirs, photographs, and suntans, serve as signs of distinction and class identity, and sometimes enable travelers to gain access to a social status and its consequent privileges in their home country (Desforges 1998).

Drawing on these significant findings on backpacker narratives and identities, I pursue an exploration of travelers' storytelling and the implications for the construction and expression of personal and collective identities. The majority of the studies of travelers' narratives have been focused on Western youth taking trips to so-called "Third World" places where they experience differences, risks and adventures, self-change and spiritual enlightenment. The limitation of data of such research has set tones for the interpretive and analytical framework scholars have drawn upon. If we consider contemporary China, we will deal with different social and historical contexts in which domestic "backpacking" travel has emerged and flourished. Travelers' experiences of place, sociality with fellow travelers, and the communication networks they are

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engaged in, all contribute to and help constitute a unique narrative of self-identity in contemporary China. This is also one of the reasons why I have adopted the native term of donkey friend (*lvyou*), instead of *beibaoke* which is the literal translation for "backpacker", in this study. Unlike Western backpackers who are often middle class youth at their teens or early twenties, loosely organized, highly independent, from Euro-American counties, crossing national boundaries, and experiencing Third World places which used to be colonies of the West (Riley 1988; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995), donkey friends are mostly young Chinese professionals mostly in their late twenties and mid thirties, organized by voluntarily formed, web-based travelers' clubs, highly engaged in interpersonal networks and communication, often traveling in groups to off-the-beaten-track places as well as minority territories within their own country.

As I have discussed in Chapter 2, writing travel stories can be seen as an obligation of every donkey friend. These travel stories are not only the straightforward record of itineraries of trips, but also personal testimonies, sharing and reports that cover a wide range of topics from describing the beauty of the landscape, to recounting the encounters with hosts and fellow donkey friends, to bringing up social critiques on the phenomena he or she has experienced on the road. The Internet has provided the necessary space for publishing these travel writings. All of the three donkey friend communities I participated in had their independent Internet forums where the registered members could post and reply to articles. Lvye and the Travel and Photography Club had to pay their ISPs (Internet Service Provider) every year for the Internet service they acquired, while the Cherokee Team had its forum under the portal site of Sina.com and thus used Internet services for free. In this chapter, I will examine the travel writings I collected from these websites, supplemented with the stories that donkey friends told me in interviews, during casual conversations, and in open discussions. Throughout my fieldwork in

China, I have read more than one thousand posts online, and sometimes, especially after the "Golden Weeks" at national holidays, I read more than twenty travelogues a day. The posts chosen for my study met several criteria: 1) they were independent and complete essays written by the person who took the journey (to ensure the authorship and limit the content), 2) they were more than 1000 words; and 3) they received more than 50 hits (i.e., they were widely read by donkey friends). These three criteria aside, I did not set limits on the style, format, and language used in the writings. In the end, I chose one hundred travelogues that I considered most representative of all the travel writings I read on the websites, and I spent a month classifying and coding them in order to tease out some "grand narratives of traveling" that can be related to the construction of personhood and identities. These grand narratives— narratives of authenticity, narratives of body discipline, and narratives of self-improvement, serve as the basis upon which donkey friends produce their travel stories and come to terms with whom they are.

In his influential work on modernity and self-identity, Giddens stresses that the "identity" of the self is not generic, neither given or static, but reflexively created and sustained. This reflexive project of the self consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised biographical narratives (1991:5). As he puts it, "A person's identity is… to be found in… the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual's biography… must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self" (1991: 54). In this theoretical framework, the traveler is seen as a narrator of his or her identity, and the diaries and journals they write all inform narrator and listener about something larger than traveling itself. My inquiry into the travel stories of donkey friends will bear upon the particularities of the construction and expression of self-identity in contemporary China, and this

study will also shed light on the historical and sociopolitical significance pertaining to identities, class and cultural critiques in contemporary Chinese society.

At the end of this chapter, I draw on Bourdieu's work on social class and lifestyles (1984), by arguing that donkey friends consider travel as a way of life[21] through which to build a sense of self, and to make sense of their surrounding world. Travel carries symbolic meanings and plays an increasingly significant role in defining social distinctions in contemporary China. Through recurring themes of *authenticity*, *body discipline*, and *self improvement* in the narratives of travel, donkey friends are able to accumulate their cultural, social and symbolic capital, and thereby distinguish themselves from China's nouveau riche, the people who got rich first under Deng Xiaoping's reforms, often considered highest on the scale of economic capital but low in terms of cultural capital by donkey friends. Stressing cultural authenticity, spiritual superiority, strong and self-disciplined character, donkey friends use their tales to tell about who they are, as well as who they are not, and these distinctions constitute part of the constructions of self and collective identity of donkey friends.

4.2   NARRATIVES OF AUTHENTICITY

MacCannell proposed that "sightseeing is a kind of collective striving for a transcendence of the modern totality, a way of attempting to overcome the discontinuity of modernity, of incorporating its fragments into unified experience" (1976: 13). In his analysis, one of the major characteristics of modernity and capitalism is the loss of stability and authenticity in everyday

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[21] See also Joseph Alter's *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India* (1992).

life. As a result, the very sense of stability and authenticity has to be found elsewhere, in other historical times, other cultures, or purer, simpler life-styles in some remote territories. A traveler should see real beauty by trekking to the places afar or climbing the highest mountains, and experience authentic friendship through the companionship on the road.

As noted earlier, according to MacCannell, the alienation and fragmentation embedded in modernity have motivated people, mostly middle class, of the capitalist West, to travel to third world countries, and seek the "authentic living experience" elsewhere. While this might be true of the rise of the modern backpacker tourism in the West, it cannot be so readily applied to the emergence and popularity of donkey friend tourism in contemporary China. As noted in Chapter 1, using travel to get away from worldly worries and quest for transcendent experience is not a modern symptom in Chinese society, but rather both a practice and mindset which can be traced back to the ancient travel activities of Chinese scholars and literati travelers since the Spring and Autumn period (770BC -221BC). Unlike the explorative activities of the Western travelers embodied in discovery and conquer, travel in Chinese historical and cultural context was not such a pleasant and triumphant endeavor because one was so attached to his or her homeland and lineage. Given the choice, Chinese people preferred to "dwell in peace and labor in joy" (*anju leye*) than "depart home and travel afar" (*Beijing lixiang*). Travel, for most Chinese people, is not an addition of territories, assets and powers, but a subtractive process wherein travelers were thought to have been forced from home, losing the rights and privileges of citizenship in his or her native country. Therefore, in the eyes of Chinese travelers, scenes and things on the road are usually embodied as they are able to awaken travelers' suppressed emotions, nostalgic reflections and philosophical inspirations, which in turn clothe the landscape with personified qualities and characters.

In the history of Chinese literature, travel has been a frequent metaphor for retreating from a corrupt and vicious reality and questing for justice, moral superiority and spiritual sublimation in an "other" world. Unlike mundane life that is full of disappointments, travel has provided a space where a traveler can reveal his or her true feelings, discover true nobility, and make true friends. It is in this sense that the recurring theme of searching for authenticity that is nearly omnipresent in donkey friends' *youji* (travelogues), has to be considered as a cultural product that has continually exerted its influence on the shaping of the personhood of Chinese travelers since the past, rather than a mere product of modernity and market economy.

As early as the Spring and Autumn period, Confucius preached to his students that such characteristics as wisdom and benevolence should be found in water and mountains. He himself was a frequent traveler who used the description of natural scenes intensively to advocate his philosophical and political thought.[22] Another prominent example of early travelers who used travel and landscapes rhetorically in their writings is Qu Yuan, the well-known ancient Chinese poet who lived more than two thousand years ago, banished from a high post in the Kingdom of Chu as a result of corruption at court. In his exile, he produced some of the greatest poetry in Chinese literature while traveling to the countryside. In his poems, he used not only physical travel experience but also imaginary spiritual trips from heaven to earth, to describe the conflict between the individual and the ruling group, to affirm his determination to fight for justice, and to express his passionate love of his country and people. From his *Li Sao* (The Lament of Sorrow after Departure), we can see his belief that water and mountains possessed life and characters and could be shaped for man's purpose. The poet galloped to the sky and reached heaven's gate, then

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[22] According to Confucius, for example, "Those who are wise delight in water; those who are benevolent delight in mountains" (Confucius, *Lunyu*, VI. 23).

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climbed up to the roof of the world and wandered to the uttermost parts of the earth, but he found no rest anywhere, because "the way was long, precipitous in view; …my slaves were sad, my steeds all neighed in grief, and, gazing back, the earth they would not leave. Since in that kingdom all my virtue spurn, why should I for the royal city yearn? Wide though the world, no wisdom can be found. I'll seek the stream where once the sage was drowned (1980: 13)."[23]

Such Chinese literature that touched upon the theme of travel contained many elements that would become the mainstay of later travel works. "Travel records", or *youji*, first appeared as an independent literary genre in the Six Dynasties (222-589), and began to achieve great development in the Tang (618-907) and Song dynasties (960-1129) (Hargett 1989). Most of the writers of youji were, like Confucius and Qu Yuan, the members of the elite, scholar-official class. They mastered the scriptural canons of Confucianism and matriculated through the arduous civil service examination process and constituted the leadership of the government bureaucracy. A great number of youji of the Tang and Song periods were produced during these civil servants' travel to and from their new assignments, and these writings were characterized by both the descriptive language used to report on "objective" and "impersonal" facts and narrative language used to express the author's "subjective" and "personal" attitudes and appreciations (Hargett 1989: 3). Another conspicuous feature of the youji genre is its use of artistic literary forms and highly polished language, through which a writer could display his linguistic talents (Hargett 1989: 2-3). Unlike the travel diaries and exploration journals kept by the early Western seafarers and explorers, Chinese youji wass not so much a straightforward record of geographical tracts and knowledge as an important medium laden with individual

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[23] This translation is found in *Li Sao and Other Poems of Qu Yuan*, (Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, 1980).

narratives and literary styles through which travelers released their emotions and articulated their aspirations. [24]

For example, in Chinese literati tradition, art is characterized by the quest to transcend the everyday world, manifested by such common ideals as retreating from the world and achieving tranquility free of earthly cares (Li 1993). Paintings and poems were the spiritual manifestations of humanity, aiming to achieve wholeness, authenticity and harmony of human and nature (Li 1993; Sullivan 1996). This philosophy also found its expression in youji writings. Due to the social and political chaos in the Six Dynasties (220-589), many of the literati had to flee the war and migrate to the south. Leaving their homelands reluctantly, disappointed with the court, they found comfort and peace in the water and mountains. Expressing his ideal of casting off all secular ambitions and pursuing a transcendent spiritual detachment, Zu Hongxun wrote after he climbed a mountain: "My mind is distant and detached as I make my lone ascent; my body floats and flutters, as if I were ready to depart from this world. Oblivious, I am no longer aware of my existence in the realm between heaven and earth" (quoted in Hargett 1989: 15). The idealism that informed Zu's youji resonates with Qu Yuan's Lament in that both authors tended to seek wisdom, comfort and peace in "other worldly" and transcendent experiences brought about by traveling to "water and mountains."

Today, the activity of keeping a journal while traveling has continued to be a popular literary endeavor. Rather than reducing the youji to a recording of information and facts, Chinese travelers continue to use youji to express their feelings, articulate their opinions, and come to terms with their self-identities. As I already discussed in Chapter 2, donkey friends consider the

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[24] To use the description of such scenes to express one's emotions and personal quest (tuowu yanzhi, jiejing shuqing) is an important rhetorical practice in Chinese ancient literature.

practice of writing youji an indispensable part of travel, which is described as "turning in the homework (*jiao zuoye*)"; it is compulsory to write a piece of youji to be considered a qualified donkey friend. These youji roughly fall into two types, one is in the form of personal testimonies dealing with feelings and opinions, and the other type includes *gonglue* (strategies) and *lushu* (book of road), which primarily provide information about travel and destination. Both of these two types reflect donkey friends' quest for authenticity en route. I will first examine some excerpts that are representative of personal testimonies, and argue that this quest for authenticity has been doubly informed by traditional literati idealism and a modern endeavor to cope with the alienation and fragmentation embedded in the neoliberal system of urban China. Then secondly I will examine some travel writings in the form of gongluo and lushu in order to study how, in everyday practice, donkey friends endeavor to conserve the "authenticity" of their trips and to safeguard the trips from any "inauthentic" elements brought about by commercialization and marketization of landscape and scenic spots (*jingdian*).

4.2.1   Personal Testimonies

"*Today, tourists can visit the Tiger Leap Gorge (Hutiao Xia) by taking a shuttle bus. They can sit comfortably in the bus without missing the great view. This travel style may bring many tourists joy, and this joy may seem so real to them. However, I believe, a donkey friend like myself does not belong to these people. Our true joy lies in somewhere else*" (Fuge, "Escaping the Santa Claus" in *South Weekly*, April 18, 2002).

"*You have to go to the Tiger Leap Gorge; it was truly fantastic. I departed from Qiaotou in the early morning, set out on the walk along a narrow path by the Jinsha River,*

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sweating all the time, keeping my body as close to the cliff as I possibly could. Under my feet Jinsha River roared aloud. Just like that, I walked and walked 'til the sun set behind the Snow Mountain and the grey shadow covered the whole valley. At the end of the water and mountains, I finally saw a village where villagers greeted me pleasantly. At night, I saw the brightest stars that were so close to me as if I could reach out and touch them. All worldly worries were gone at this moment..." (A donkey friend posted at the travel forum, Sina.com).

These two pieces of youji were written by two different donkey friends, but interestingly they correspond to each other in many ways. They provide a good example for what is authentic in a donkey friend's eyes. In the first youji, ordinary tourists came and visited the Tiger Leap Gorge by bus, they admired the view through the bus windows, they were satisfied with the scenes arranged for them, and they did not bother to walk further behind the scene. By contrast, the second youji describes a donkey friend who visited the Tiger Leap Gorge in a different way. This traveler chose to trek along the valley, traveling through dangerous places and enduring physical hardship. The author second recorded the striking features of the terrain, such as twisting mountain paths cut into cliffs, the roaring river below the cliffs, awe-inspiring Snow Mountains, and a beautiful starry night, as well as the hospitable people he met en route. All these descriptions contain many elements that are typical of travel writings of donkey friends, and they try to convey the sense of authenticity through detailed and vivid descriptions of the hardship of travel and spiritual enlightenment achieved only after conquering these difficulties.

The highlight of the second youji is the theme of returning to nature and casting away all the worldly worries, which echoes the spirit of idealism and romanticism representative of Chinese ancient literati travelers. Ancient travelers and modern donkey friends find authenticity

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in remote and less-traveled places not only because such places evoke transcendent and even religious reflections, but also because these places are located away from the political and economic centers of the state.

An example of the difference between state-promoted scenic places and those preferred by donkey friends can be found in an event of selecting the "Top Ten Places" that donkey friends most wanted to travel to. The event, initiated by the *Chinese National Geography*, one of the most popular magazines, widely read by donkey friends, attracted many donkey friends to participate by sending the lists of their "top ten" to editors. In the volume of October, 2005, the magazine published the final list based on the selection of donkey friends. In the preface to this volume, the chief editor admitted that he was surprised to find their results so different from the official rankings of national scenic spots by the National Tourism Administration. He wrote:

> "When I compared the distribution of national scenic spots and the places selected by donkey friends, I was surprised by the differences. Most of the national scenic spots are distributed in East China; whereas the top rankings in our list are mostly distributed in the west. I came to doubt the qualification of those national scenic spots. It seems to me that where population density is higher, railways and roads are more widely built, and the economy is better developed, there are more national scenic spots. What about the most beautiful mountain Nanjiabawa, our number one valley Yaluzabu River Valley and the Hulunbeier grassland selected in our list? … Although they are not ranked as star scenic spots by the state, they are our true 'heroes'."

The article observed that it was the omnipresent power relations that have influenced the official ranking of national scenic spots. Most of the national scenic spots are located in China's east, because there lay the state's political and economic power centers, whereas the "top ten"

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places in the eyes of donkey friends stress such criteria as original beauty and genuine customs not spoiled by tourism development, which unsurprisingly resulted in the exclusion of those officially recognized scenic spots. Therefore, the ranking of the "top ten" by donkey friends have not only conveyed their preferences but also expressed their negative attitudes towards the "commodification" and "marketization" of places in contemporary China. The authenticity of a place, a landscape or a culture, lies in its quality of refusing to be bought, sold, traded, or put on stage in a market. To quote MacCannell: "the line is the same as the one between furniture and priceless antiques or between prostitution and 'true' love which is supposed to be beyond price" (1976: 155). It is also one of the reasons why when Zhongdian, a town bordering Yunnan and Tibet, was renamed "Shangri-la" by the local government to promote tourism, donkey friends refused to use the new name, and admitted that the place seemed less interesting to them now as a result of the government campaign. As MacCannell points out, the structure of authentic attractions and touristic experiences constitutes a total inversion of consumer behavior in the industrial world and the structure of commodities (1976: 157). Thus, an "authentic" experience cannot be purchased; likewise, an "authentic" place cannot be commercialized, nor can it be fairly evaluated by the state.

4.2.2 Gonglue / Lushu

Donkey friends have done a lot to circumvent commercial transactions. They search for the cheapest ways to reach a remote place, which includes finding cheap transportation and accommodation, eating local food, buying local goods at local markets, relying on local information or word-of-mouth information from other donkey friends, and completely avoiding tourist agencies. All of the information will end up in a newly emerged type of youji, *lushu*,

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literally translated as the "book of the road", or *gonglue*, "strategy of the road". The format of *lushu* or *gonglue* usually imitates that of popular guidebooks for backpackers such as the *Lonely Planet*. Taking the example of a *gonglue* for Daocheng, a small town on the border of Tibet and Sichuan, famous for the snowy mountains and plateaus, the author started with some facts about the place such as the best season to visit, then recounted his own itinerary that included detailed information on how to find a driver, a local guide if necessary, where to eat authentic and cheap food, where to find a cheap hostel, and how to buy souvenirs at bargain prices. The author also added personal recommendations and criticisms regarding the reputation of a place, a hostel, or a driver. These personal observations and opinions are very important for a good *lushu* or *gonglue*, since they are from real travel experiences of fellow donkey friends rather than the promotion of tourist agencies and official guidebooks which are often considered unreliable and suspect due to their commercial nature.

Lushu and *gonglue* often provide practical strategies on how to circumvent certain rules and regulations that are set up for commercial ends, for instance, how to avoid purchasing tickets. In cities, Chinese people will not find it surprising that they need to buy tickets to enter a public park or a museum. However, it is a different case when some landscape, say mountain or lake, or a village of minority people, begins to charge money for admission. Donkey friends are often indignant about this practice and they condemn local governments that take advantage of the natural beauty and spoil the nature of their beauty and authenticity. As a result, donkey friends protest this by using tricks to avoid purchasing tickets.

When I followed two donkey friends to visit the Lugu Lake, which is famous for its beauty and its local Mosuo culture, I successfully avoided buying the expensive ticket to enter the Lake area. Before we set out to the Lake, my companions had read the relevant *gonglue* from

the Internet and learned how to get around the ticket office. We took the shuttle bus from Lijiang to the township of Lugu, but we got off the bus before we arrived at the bus terminal. We had learned that all the mini-buses to the Lake from the terminal were run by the local government and would definitely charge us for the tickets. Rather than taking the mini-bus at the central terminal, we planned to go to a smaller terminal where we could ask a local driver to take us to the Lake area. Since local people are not charged for tickets, they sometimes make money out of donkey friends like us. It should be noted that the profit made from selling tickets did not go to the local villagers, but to the head of the villages, therefore the villagers did not really care if we bought tickets and seemed pleased to assist us in evading the ticket costs if they could make some extra money themselves. We offered to pay the driver 150RMB if he could take us into the area without being caught. In that case, he earned 150RMB, and each one of us only spent 50 RMB rather than 180RMB for the admission ticket. Everything went well, as planned, and we got to the Lake area without being caught and without paying for the tickets.

The point in this case was not only that we found a way to save money on the trip, but also that donkey friends preferred to pay a local person than to pay for local government. Avoiding travel establishments such as the ticket offices, donkey friends are able to claim to have a more authentic experience in the local environment and to interact with and for the benefit of local people. In so doing, donkey friends have de facto expressed their disagreement with and disdain towards the tourist authorities that made profits out of culture, natural scenes and people. It is in this sense that they differentiated themselves from the "naïve" tourists who are said to be always taken in and manipulated by the authorities.

4.3   NARRATIVES OF BODY

I have seen a mysterious map about a trekking route from Daocheng to the Lugu Lake. It was left by two "brave men" who had successfully trekked along this truly off-the-beaten route. They wrote on the map, "if you cannot bear eating the local food, or not taking a shower; if you are afraid of heights, wild animals, flies, and fleas; if you do not feel comfortable pissing in the wild; if you lack patience, courage or confidence; if you cannot take it slowly…do not ever try this route." I was challenged by these words, and decided to give it a try.

River Fish, a donkey friend who owned and ran the Travel and Photograph Club together with Dan (woman donkey friend), wrote in his youji about how he was first motivated to trek from Daocheng to Lugu Lake, a 200km-long route rarely touched by either tourists or donkey friends. He continued to recount his travel story in his youji. He, with three fellow donkey friends, rode on the local bus and traveled to their first destination, Daocheng. The bus found its way through the winding ridges of the mountains with the average altitude of 4000 meters above sea level. Then they had to transfer to a local mini-bus to reach the starting point on the map. He described them in the bumping bus as if they had been squeezed into a can of sardines, seeing only the gray sky and black earth (*huntian heidi*). In his youji, River Fish wrote, "in order to reach this place, I tolerated all kinds of difficulties, such as the long bus ride along high altitude mountain ridges and bumpy roads, altitude sickness, rough food and etc.. However, the love of nature has helped me not only conquer but also enjoy all these difficulties and discomforts."

Health risks, sickness, eating habits, environmental danger, physical frailty and exhaustion, among others, are recurring themes in the narratives of donkey friends when they recount their trips to some remote and environmentally challenging places. River Fish is not

alone in his search for the hardship on his trips, feeling satisfied, tough, and more often than not, superior to those who are unable to face such challenges. By challenging their physical limits, donkey friends try to articulate who they are and differentiate themselves from others through the medium of their bodies.

Donkey friends use two categories to describe how and to what extent their bodies are engaged in travel activities. One is *zinűe*, often abbreviated as ZN, literally translated as "self torture" or "self abuse", and the other is *fubai*, abbreviated as FB, meaning "corruption" or "self-indulgence."[25] ZN often refers to more physically challenging activities such as hiking, trekking, mountain climbing, camping, and traveling to off-beat or to remote minority locations. By contrast, FB refers to more leisurely and relaxing traveling activities. Despite the difference, ZN and FB are relative terms. In River Fish's biography, he characterized these two terms as:

FB: our FB has nothing to do with the official corruption that is loathed by the people. FB, in its broadest sense, refers to all the recreational activities: eating, drinking, playing, and having fun (chi he wan le). The purpose is to enjoy oneself. These activities include sun bathing on the beach, fishing in the wild, feasting in local restaurants, etc.. Donkey friends engaged in FB activities often greet each other, "where did you FB yesterday?"

ZN: ZN is a term opposing FB. There are donkey friends who always participate in the most physically challenging activities, and enjoy the great joy of the spirit while the body is extremely tortured, as the saying goes, "you can see the heavens while the body is trapped in hell." Therefore ZN is often addressed in another term, Biantai, or pervert, abbreviated as BT. Donkey friends engaged in ZN activities often greet each other, "got any idea where to go ZN next week?"

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[25] ZN and FB are both verb and adjective in Chinese, which will be used as such in this chapter.

It should be noted that ZN does not necessarily exclude FB activities. On the contrary, some go to ZN in order to enjoy FB more. For instance, it is not uncommon to see ZN donkey friends take all the risks and difficulties to reach the summit of a snowy mountain. What they discuss most at the pinnacle of the mountain is where to go to FB as they go down.

More detailed classifications of ZN and FB activities are summed up in the categorization of five-levels by the Lvye community.

Level I (leisure activities): photography, picnicing, light-weight travel, play sports, driving…

Level II (preliminary climbing and trekking activities): low-level mountain climbing, camping and rock climbing…

Illustration: male carrying 15-25kg and female carrying 15-20kg, at the trekking speed of about 3.5km per hour on the mountain. Due to the difficulty of measuring the variation of the sea level, trekking continuously over 5 hours but less than 8 hours is level II, 10 hours is level 2.5.

Level III (intensified climbing and trekking activities): intensified mountain climbing and trekking and more risky activities.

Illustration: male carrying 15-25kg and female carrying 15-18kg, at the trekking speed of about 3.5km per hour on the mountain. Due to the difficulty of measuring the variation of altitude, trekking continuously for 12 hours is level 3.

Level IV (more intensified activities): highly intensified mountain climbing and trekking.

Illustration: male carrying 15-25kg at the trekking speed of about 3.5km per hour on the mountain. Due to the difficulty of measuring the variation of the sea level, trekking continuously for 14 hours is level IV.

Level V: extremely intense mountain climbing and trekking.

Illustration: climbing Taibai Mountain and reaching the summit without rest within one day. Only Xuanniao (ID) has achieved this.

In these detailed descriptions of different levels of ZN and FB, the body has become the object of the measurement and evaluation. The body is evaluated by the speed with which it moves, the weight of the load it is carrying, the length of time during which it can persist and endure, along with the types of activities in which the body is engaged. Donkey friends use these somatic principles and classifications to recognize a donkey's qualification and reputation. For instance, donkey friends who have reached level III are often admired by others and given the title "tough donkey" or "mule," and those who have reached level V are already legendary figures.

In her study of sports and body culture in contemporary China, Brownell points out that the body, as a metaphor for national strength, has always been caught in the national anxieties and contentions concerning its moral order and national modernizations (1995: 44-45). She writes, "Since the devastating encounter with Western powers in the last century, Chinese nationalism has been very closely linked with the body, so that the act of individuals strengthening their bodies was linked to the salvation of the nation…This link of sports, the military, and national salvation persisted until recently, reflecting the militaristic nature of communist body culture as a whole" (1995: 22). Today, anxiety concerning the body and national welfare is still clearly manifested in the state's endeavor to make China a major power in the sports world. Athletes winning an Olympic gold medal are viewed as "winning glory for the country" and treated as national heroes. The 2008 Olympic Games have been seen as a

national project in which both Chinese citizens and overseas Chinese "should" take pride and be engaged in one way or another.

Donkey friends, most of whom are in their twenties and thirties have learned to discipline their bodies at a very early age. As a native Chinese who received all my pre-graduate education in China, I remember clearly that since primary school, the preparation and practice for every opening ceremony for school sports games were when the techniques of military discipline were imparted to us. These disciplining techniques included standing upright (*zhan zhi*), holding one's head high and erect (*tai tou*), throwing out one's chest (*ting xiong*), shouting slogans (*han kou hao*), goose-stepping (*zou zheng bu*), and forming orders (*zu dui xing*). It is against this backdrop that most donkey friends have grown up. As an anecdote, Brownell recounted an embarrassing incident during the time when she took part in a training camp for the National College Games. When the team practiced its goose-stepping, her goose-stepping became an object of amusement. Her teammates were surprised that she had never learned how to goose-step and admitted that they had all learned in school from the time they were small (1995: 148-9). Although military training and physical culture training have remained significant parts of Chinese education, since the 1980s, "there [has been] a move away from the militaristic communist body culture toward consumer culture" (Brownell 1995: 22).

Dozens of times, I heard donkey friends say that ZN travel often reminded them of the military training of their earlier years and made them nostalgic. The difference is that they were forced to participate in military training regardless of their will, whereas ZN travel is voluntary and, as one donkey friend told me, "intentionally seeking the bitterness." To many donkey friends, ZN is a way to get out of the routine of the workaday life which seems even more intolerable than physical exhaustion. If physical training is direct discipline of the body, the

routine workday from 9am to 5pm (*zhao jiu wan wu*) seems to exert an intangible, subtle but more intense and infinitesimal power over the active body. In the opinion of a donkey friend, this working lifestyle of many Chinese professionals not only dictates when to sleep and when to get up, when to rest, when to get pregnant and when to get sick, but also makes one weak, unhealthy, and inferior in "physical capital." During my interviews and casual conversations with donkey friends, many of them admitted that they had quit their jobs simply in order to travel. The majority expressed admiration toward those who had chosen to resign from their jobs, and all of them admired my ability to do fieldwork that could justifiably combine work and travel.

They expressed their feelings toward work and travel in youji, "Silver" wrote:

For a fairly long period of time, I have been confused about whether I work from Monday through Friday, or I work on Saturday or Sunday. Sometimes I feel that I work on weekdays for one purpose: to go out on the weekend. Since I am always exhausted when I get back from weekend trips, I actually take workdays from Monday through Friday [at her job] to rest. I refuse to work overtime, in order to go out again next weekend.

The confusion Silver expressed toward "work" and "travel" is closely related to the way in which her body is consumed and her energy and strength are disposed. Rather than spending her energy at her work, she chooses to exhaust her strength in ZN and hardship tourism. In contrast to Silver who uses weekdays to recuperate and weekends to ZN, "Ji" chose to quit her job. She wrote in her youji that she had never regretted it. In fact, this decision was "so right" that once she came back home, she was even more reluctant to go to work than before. She said,

When I was sitting in the office, I was always wondering why I was here and what I was doing here. Sitting in front of the computer, editing articles, sorting documents for my boss, all

of these were so meaningless. When I was working, I felt weak and unhealthy, so I never let myself work overtime or get too tired. But when I was traveling, I felt strong and healthy again. I could trek for several hours without any rest. I do not know how I made it now!

Ji's story clearly demonstrates that her body refuses to be docile, instrumental and productive as it is required by the neoliberal state to achieve its economic development and "modernization." Foucault has argued that since the eighteenth century, the body has been caught in the new set of disciplining techniques, the "political anatomy", which aims to control, manipulate and discipline the body to meet certain speed, efficiency and effects of utility without maintaining the costly and violent relation of the past (1984: 182). Foucault has described various disciplinary regimens that made the body docile and subjected, such as the asylum, prison, school and army. In this sense, the modern company is clearly a new form of disciplining regimen. Its disciplining power lies in its ability to make the body follow a strictly established timetable, control its health by providing medical insurance, food allowance, and sometimes, gym facilities, as well as its ability to train and restrict the body to dress and pose in a certain ways so that the work can be done effectively. Despite the omnipresence and effectiveness of this disciplining power, the body has not been completely docile.

By exerting energy and strength in exhausting ZN activities, or using the weekdays at work to recuperate and save energy for weekend treks, donkey friends have found a way to use and transform their bodies in their own way. At the same time, donkey friends criticize a number of aspects of modern life. They point to the 9-5 work routine as exploiting one's health and freedom. Sitting in air-conditioned offices, working in front of the computer for over ten hours, eating irregularly, and even using cell phones too much have been seen as causing many physical and mental health problems such as insomnia, depression, stomach problems, and headaches.

The concept of FB also serves to criticize "corrupt" modern lifestyles and mass-consumerism. In the narratives of donkey friends, FB, although literally translated as corruption and self-indulgence, refers to extra fun activities and enjoyment in ZN activities. Unlike expensive consumer goods and economic transactions that are corrupt or involve bribery, a can of sardines or any kind of meat is FB stuff in the desert. Playing cards is a FB activity in the mountains, and eating at a local restaurant is extremely FB when donkey friends come down from the mountain. It is not uncommon to hear such comments as "I ate the most delicious instant noodles on the mountain," "I will never forget the dinner we had in that little restaurant, each one of us only spent 5 RMB," and so on. When they recount that they find satisfaction and fun in such simple lifestyles, they also admit that they feel healthier and stronger than they used to when they dined out at expensive restaurants and ate a lot of meat and drank too much alcohol.

4.4   NARRATIVES OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Litang, a place never mentioned in any of my guidebooks, let me most truly experience the existence of gods. The high altitude brought my soul out of this world; I seemed to feel the touch of their sacred robes, and see them laugh, say prayers and sleep. All living experiences disappeared behind the snowy mountains, the golden grasslands and the wheel of dharma (a donkey friend posted at the travel forum at sina.com).

Religion and ritual have been important themes in earlier anthropological studies of human culture and society. In tandem with the rise of structuralism in both Britain and France, many social scientists tended to see ritual as an indispensable part of human life not only in

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primitive societies but also in larger complex societies. In their studies of the structure of sacrifice, Hubert and Mauss (1964) observed the sacredness of the period between the entry into and departure from the ritual, when the individual was supposed to gain extraordinary powers of healing and an ability to create miracles. However, it was not until 1909 that Van Gennep provided a framework for the analysis and understanding of the ritual process in *Rite of Passage* (1909). The works of Hubert and Mauss, Durkheim (1912), and Van Gennep are more concerned with traditional small-scale societies in which religion pervaded everything and rituals played a fundamental function of regulating the structures of social organizations. Many contemporary schools realize that ritual analysis can be applied to tourism studies (see especially Graburn 1983, 1989; Smith 1992; Cohen 1985, 1992).

Victor Turner has emerged as one of the leading exponents and elaborators of Van Gennep's ritual theory in his studies of Christian pilgrimages (1995, 1978). He applied Van Gennep's notion of rites of passage which are marked by separation, marginality, and reincorporation (Van Gennep 1909) to his ethnographic study of rituals of Ndembu people (1995). Drawing upon this "Turnerian tradition," Graburn (1983) sees that tourism and pilgrimage share numerous similarities, "tourism, even of the recreational sort – sun, sea, sex, and sport – is a ritual expression – individual or societal – of deeply held values about health, freedom, nature, and self improvement, a re-creation ritual which parallels pilgrimages …" (15). In a similar vein, MacCannell suggests that sightseeing is a modern ritual (1976).

The storytelling of donkey friends, more often than not, bears out this similarity between their travel experiences and pilgrimage. One of the most striking similarities is that they often refer to certain places as sacred. These places are often snowy mountains, lakes on a plateau, places untouched by outsiders, and minority regions where people have distinct religious beliefs.

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Donkey friends consistently describe deep and profound personal changes that occur as a result of their travels.

As River Fish came back from his trek from Daocheng to Lugu Lake, he wrote,

All the nightmares and sweet dreams have ended at this moment, I told myself as I was sitting on the second floor of Husi Tea House, overlooking the beautiful Lugu Lake. Looking back, I found it so hard to choose an appropriate word to describe my feelings. Suffering, exciting, surprising or what? I only know one thing for sure, this trip has changed me deeply and will stay in my memory forever. Think about it, walking on ridges 4000 meters above sea level, the sea of clouds formed and dissolved under your feet. At one glimpse, deep valleys and winding rivers appeared and soon disappeared…

Profound personal change is also reflected in their narrations of learning something important from the trip. Jeep Girl was among the first ones to have set foot on Kekexili, a snow covered land bordering Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang, known for its harsh natural environment as well as for the Tibetan antelope, recently chosen as one of the mascots for the 2008 Olympic Games. Jeep Girl wrote in her youji,

I was attracted by the fact that no one has ever set foot on the land. I can discover things with my own eyes. The trip to Kekexili has inspired a sense of awe in me towards nature. Coming back from the trip, I always try to persuade fellow donkey friends not to go to Kekexili, since I have realized how important it is to protect this sacred land and its animals, and how much human existence could destroy it.

The learning process has become a significant part of travel that could be differentiated from "ludic" and "irresponsible" mass tourism. As Jeep Girl summarized,

At the beginning, you only care about traveling per se, but once you begin to travel, you will learn how to protect the environment. For example, every time we travel in the "Cherokee Team," the team leader brings trash bags, and reminds the members not to take anything out with us except trash. When we leave, we girls collect trash and pick up cigarette butts. Gradually newcomers will be influenced and learn to do the same.

Through travel, many donkey friends believe that they have become better people who are more open-minded, responsible, tolerant, and happier. Participation in a trip as a donkey friend, and learning common values and codes of conduct, grant one cultural capital, with which one can claim the collective identity of donkey friend. This identity allows a donkey friend to distinguish him or herself from the majority of city dwellers in general, and from guided tourists in particular. Donkey friends often view both of them as ignorant and irresponsible, and criticize them as the wrongdoers who drop trash everywhere, spit on the streets, carve their names at historic sites, and lack of respect towards their hosts and towards nature.

4.5   CONCLUSION: TRAVEL AS SOCIAL DISTINCTION

Drawing upon narratives of authenticity, narratives of the body and self-improvement, donkey friends have been able to define and maintain social distinctions, and thereby, make sense of who they are through their tales and their everyday practices. Concerning the relationship between postmodern cultural practices and the development of the new middle class, Munt (1994) has applied Bourdieu's analysis of class and taste to tourism studies. Bourdieu distinguished two principal fractions within a new and expanded middle class. One is the "new bourgeoisie," which is "located in the service sector with finance, marketing and purchasing as occupational

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exemplars, a class fraction high on both economic capital (finance) and cultural capital" (Munt 1994: 107), the other is the "new petit bourgeoisie," which "comes into its own in all the occupations involving presentation and representation," a class fraction low on economic capital (Boudieu 1984: 359). Therefore they must create an "alternative" lifestyle such as a style of travel in order to enhance their cultural capital to compensate for insufficient economic capital (Munt 1994: 108). It is within the class fraction of the "new petit bourgeoisie," that Munt detected the bearers of a postmodern travel, such as drifters and backpackers, who search for authentic experiences, create intellectual lifestyles and tastes, and portray themselves as unclassifiable and excluded from the mainstream of the society (Munt 1994: 107-108).

The travel of donkey friends resembles Munt's postmodern travel in a number of ways. Donkey friends represent a newly emerged middle class group that is high in cultural and social capital but relatively low in economic capital compared with the new rich in contemporary China. Donkey friend narratives show that they distinguish themselves from the guided tourists in particular and from ordinary people in general. By taking part in this alternative travel activity, donkey friends accumulate cultural capital when they relay narratives of authenticity, body and self-improvement. When they expand their social networks with fellow donkey friends, they accumulate social capital. At some point, donkey friends can sometimes transform their cultural and social capital into economic capital. Jiacuo, for instance, successfully secured his job when he learned that his boss was a donkey friend who belonged to the same travel club. A number of donkey friends have begun to start their own businesses dealing with outdoor activities using the social networks established in travel clubs. Inversely, owners of these outdoor supply shops and cafés give donkey friends special discounts and provide gathering places for donkey friends. It is in this sense that donkey friends have successfully set up social distinctions with which they can

make sense of and articulate who they are, and at the same time, express their criticism of

modern lifestyles and values that most of them continue to encounter in their everyday lives.

5.0   WOMEN ON THE ROAD

As I am sitting at my desk in my small apartment in Pittsburgh, reminiscing about my fieldwork in China, I always think about MM or female donkey friends. The image of a woman dressed in unisex outdoor clothing, carrying a huge backpack nearly one third of her height, and climbing mountains or hiking in jungles, often comes to mind. This makes me wonder if it is only through "her" that I can really refer back to my own travel experience in China, and through this "detour" that I come to know myself. She has such a visible and conspicuous presence in China today that you can hardly neglect her, in groups or by herself, in off-the-beaten-path places, on Internet forums, in photographs or in travel stories. The term "MM" (an abbreviation for meimei), or little sister, is used by women donkey friends to address themselves. MMs have inspired new imaginings of gender relations, femininity, and body politics in contemporary China. When a MM travels to cities and villages with her backpack and heavy load of outdoor gear, she becomes the object of the gaze of both male donkey friends and ordinary people. She gazes back, using her camera and pen to narrate and to consciously reflect on her subject position as both a woman and a donkey friend.

In this chapter, I draw on the life stories of three female donkey friends, and let them speak in the first person about their travel experiences. The stories tell about their preferences, decisions, difficulties and perseverance. Through these stories they negotiate their roles as daughters, sisters, wives, and MMs. Gi and Princess told me their stories in semi-structured

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interviews and daily conversations. All three, Princess, Gi and Ding Dang wrote of their travel experiences in Blogs and travel forums on the Internet. In their twenties, all of them are graduates from reputable colleges and have good jobs. Gi is married, and the other two are single. Gi is a Beijing native and resident, who usually travels with Lvye donkey friends. Princess is a Beijing resident who is originally from Wuhan, Hubei Province. She often posts her travel plans online and chooses her travel companions from those who have replied to her posts. Ding Dang is from Guizhou Province, and currently teaches at Xiamen University. She tends to travel to the most off-the-beaten-track places alone. Despite their differences in background and travel experiences, they share the common title of female donkeys, MM.

5.1   PRINCESS

In a delicate-looking café that Princess selected, she talked to me about the first time she decided to travel with strangers but ended up traveling alone:

I have never asked my colleagues to travel with me, nor have I asked my friends, because we know each other so well and we will have conflicts of interest. I am a person who tends to avoid conflict, so I always travel with strangers. I began to seek travel companions on the Internet in 2003 when I planned to take my annual leave and travel to Lijiang. In the beginning, I got one reply from a man, but I ended up standing him up because I did not feel comfortable about traveling with a male stranger at the time. Before I gave everything up, I received an email from another guy. I told him that I was not planning to go any more, so he set out alone. We maintained in communication via SMS. After he got to the old town of Lijiang, he kept pushing me to join him, telling me how

pretty and quiet it was over there and assuring me that I could find what I was looking for there. So I was persuaded. I took nine days off – five days of annual leave plus two weekends.

When I arrived at Lijiang, I learned that he was on his way to Zhongdian, and I was forced to travel alone for the first time in my life in such a strange place. It was cloudy and rainy; I walked in the old town of Lijiang with no purpose, I knew no one, and I read no *gonglue* (strategy). I was timid and shy, and I was also so nervous that I often felt that people around me would cheat me or something like that. I spent the next two or three days doing nothing, just hanging around, drinking tea somewhere and talking with some strangers to kill the time. And then I suddenly decided to head for Zhongdian after I caught a post outside the tea house. This was not a tourist agency, but a *zifa* (voluntarily initiated) organization that would plan and organize the trip for donkey friends. I put down 100 RMB for the deposit. But eventually I did not make it. You know, I am a very emotional girl and I always make decisions spontaneously. One day I took a taxi on the way back to the hotel, and I asked the driver how much if he took me to Zhongdian. He told me it would be 200RMB per day, a lot more expensive than joining the group trip. But I made my decision and told the driver, OK, let's go now. So off we went.

The experience of traveling alone might have made me become brave. I became more daring when I got back from Zhongdian. I then met the guy who persuaded me to take this trip. We, together with some middle school students from Kunming, rented a minivan and headed for the Lugu Lake. By then my vacation time had run out. But I was young and I tended to avoid my responsibilities when I did not know how to resolve the problem. So I just sent a SMS to my boss saying I would be a few days late back to work,

and then I turned off my cell phone and threw it away. Later, when I got back to work, my boss told me, if it were somebody else, we would surely have fired that person.

As we can see from her ID, Princess is a city girl who has been well taken care of, and a little indulged by the people around her. A unisex image of a female donkey friend is often evoked when talking about young women taking journeys alone or with men, traveling long distance and traveling to off-the-beaten locations. In contrast to this image, Princess is quite feminine in appearance: she has fair skin, dresses in up-to-date fashions, and her nails were well done. Even when she chose outdoor clothing, most of which were unisex styles, she would be very careful to pick up something in bright colors or in smaller sizes to make herself look good. She knew very well how to protect herself and how to use her femininity to achieve her goals while traveling with male donkey friends. As she continued her story:

Since then I have begun to really initiate trips and seek travel companions on the Internet. I know where I am going and I have my own plans. For example, I read and heard about a place called Bing Zhong Luo in Yunnan and I knew that very few tourists have gone there. Plus the name of the place sounded good, so I decided to go to Bing Zhong Luo. I would read a lot of gonglues (strategies) on the Internet and set my own plans before I submitted posts to the travel forums on the Internet. I had more personal initiative this time, and more importantly, I began to set my own criteria to choose my travel companions. First of all, they should be at my age and generation, since people from different age cohorts have different lifestyles. Second, I will never consider couples as travel companions. I think they (couples) are pitiful and many donkey friends share my opinion. On the one hand, couples always separate themselves from others and mind their own business. They are stingy and care only about the most trivial things. On the other

hand, they are often interested in topics such as children and household stuff. [26] I remember there was a couple who shared a minivan with us on our way to Zhongdian. They insisted on buying some vegetables at a local market, and kept us waiting for them for more than half an hour! Everyone was angry. Above all, my criteria for travel companions are very clear: they must be of the same generation, not couples, not too many, not too few, including both males and females.

The golden team is composed of two males and one female. The reason is, first of all, rooms with three beds are always cheaper than rooms with two beds. Second, one male – one female combination is too vulnerable to love affairs. We are adults, and we are lonely adults on the road. A girl is especially weak and frail in a desolate place or harsh environment. A glass of water might make you fall in love with someone. It's dangerous. Two males and one female is a balanced triangle for me. Two males often compete in front of a girl, and they check on each other not to do something bad to the girl. When I traveled with two guys in Guizhou, at first I felt a little uncomfortable to share a room with them. But gradually I began to get used to their presence and enjoy their funny talks. They took good care of me and never argued with me. I could drive them out when I planned to take a shower. They could do nothing but wait outside holding their washbasins. They let me take charge of a number of things such as our financial records. I was not too good at math but they never cared about any mistakes I made. They did not even take a look at my records in the end.

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[26] Silver, another donkey friend, has talked about the generosity of couples (chapter 6). Princess' opinion is from her own experiences.

At first glance, traveling to Guizhou with two males seems to be a bold decision, but it turned out to the happiest trip I have ever had. Before I decided to travel with them, I tried many ways to find out as much about them as possible. One of them told me that he was a good guy, having a girlfriend, a family, and a decent job. I asked if he had traveled before, where he had been, where he grew up, what his father did, what his mother did, where he was working… Then I told him that I still could not trust him one hundred percent. He then gave me his work phone number and said, "Call me and see if I am truly working here." Just like that, I had to make sure they were decent persons before I traveled with them.

Princess is not the only girl I met who traveled with male donkey friends, and none of them, as far as I was aware, experienced trouble with their male travel companions. Like Princess, MM donkeys take great care against the potential danger of such male-female travel combinations. For instance, they take initiatives in selecting travel companions, avoid traveling with one single male, and at the same time, they let males take care of them and make many of the general decisions such as where to stay, what to eat and the like. In this way, female donkey friends enjoy the freedom of being a donkey friend and the privilege of being a female without losing their personal autonomy and agency.

5.2   GI

I met Gi when both of us signed up for an Inner Mongolia trip organized by Dan in the Travel and Photography Club. We struck up a conversation when we chose to stay behind while others went for an outing to a nearby lake. I stayed behind because it was too hot outside and I preferred

to talk with people in the air-conditioned camp houses; Gi chose to stay with me because she had

her period and she was too tired to go out in such a hot afternoon. When I asked about how she

fell in love with travel, she told me:

I first traveled when I was 4 years old with my family. My family members all like to

travel, and I guess I must have inherited some "travel-genes" from them. During my

freshman year (2001), I got to know that there were groups of people called "donkey

friends" who traveled in groups. I searched on the Internet and found the website of

Lvye. Despite my ignorance of outdoor activities, Lvye people were warm-hearted and

eager to answer my questions, and even took me to buy the necessary outdoor clothes and

equipment. Touched by this atmosphere of friendliness and closeness, I began to join

them as a "fresh donkey."

Beginning early this year I quit my job and began to travel frequently either by myself or

with donkey friends. When I was working, I wondered why on earth I should sit here in

front of the cold-blooded computer. Was I crazy? I was only at my twenties, why should I

spend the best years of my life writing and editing official documents? Why should I give

my psychological and physical strength to those at work who had no connection with my

life? I felt that my presence in the office was senseless and meaningless. I did not know

what I was doing there.

My colleagues admired my courage to quit my job and often talked about how they

wanted to just quit, too. But it requires courage. Despite the admiration from my former

colleagues, my husband wanted me to remain at work. It was not about the money, but he

believed that an unemployed person will someday become a "waste" to society since she

does not use her brain or energy in an appropriate way. He did not really try to stop me

since he knew that it would be useless. All my family members like to travel. Although they have to pretend to criticize me in front of my husband, they support me behind his back.

It was only later that Gi told me that her husband wanted a divorce. When she asked if it was because she traveled too much, his answer was "no"… he just did not love her any more. I recalled her husband's disapproval when she quit her job and traveling around because he thought travel was not productive but a wasteful form of consumption, or "a waste of time." I wondered why she did not invite her husband to travel with her so that he could share the pleasure she enjoyed on the road. Gi looked sad and admitted that sometimes she just preferred to travel alone:

After I quit my job, I traveled to Sichuan, Yunnan, Shanxi Province, Xi'an, Jinan, Hainan, Neimenggu and Wuyuan. Besides Wuyuan and Jinan where I traveled alone, I sought travel companions from the Internet. Many of them were complete strangers, but I always trusted them. As far as I am concerned, travel with donkey friends is very safe and free. This March (2005), I saw a post in the forum of Lvye, recruiting travel companions to go to Daocheng and Yading. I was free at the time so I responded and said that I was in. We were all too busy to have a prep meeting, so we had not met one another until we got to the airport. Our team started with two guys and four girls. In the end, only two girls and one guy stuck together. We three trekked in the harshest high altitude environment. Traveling with strangers, you have to be more independent and responsible. I like to travel with strangers precisely because that I like the feeling of independence and freedom that I rarely feel with my family. For example, I give up easily if I climb mountains with my husband. However, when I trekked with fellow donkey friends in

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Yading, I never knew that I possessed that kind of potential! The other girl had a stomachache; even so, she and I kept trekking on the mountain 4000 meters above the sea level. Our male donkey friend wanted to give up and rent a horse. But when he saw the perseverance displayed by our girls, he forgot the idea of horseback-riding. Eventually he had to admit that female endurance is unimaginable and should not be downgraded.

The last time I met Gi in a café near her apartment, she was struggling to decide whether she should give up her donkey friend lifestyle or her marriage. "But didn't he tell you that it had nothing to do with travel?" I asked her.

"Yes. It was what he told me," Gi said, "I got the feeling that he did not oppose traveling per se, but my overall attitude. It seemed to him that I could give up everything, for example my job, just to travel around. I guess it made him feel insecure and left behind."

"Then what do you plan to do?" I asked.

"I will begin to look for a job and become an office lady again."

"But isn't it that you hate that lifestyle?"

"Well, I have to save my marriage. You know, I am still a woman, and then a person who likes to travel." She sighed.

As a female donkey friend, the greatest concern is not the danger or hardship she may encounter in a journey, but the disapproval of her family. Female donkey friends often face more pressure and opposition than their male companions due to their roles as daughter, wife and mother, who should, according to the social norms, stay at home and take care of their parents, husbands and children. More often than not, a female donkey friend will yield to this pressure and give up her travel interests, but in some other cases, they choose to remain single in order to go wherever they like, even to the most dangerous places that few men would go.

5.3   DING DANG

I did not meet Ding Dang in person, and this account was taken from her long and detailed youji (travelogue) on the website[27]. She also made a film of her trip to Motuo – a sacred Tibetan Buddhist site – which was circulated widely on the Internet. She claimed to be the first female donkey friend who ever set her foot on this formidable land. She wrote in her youji:

> Motuo, a legendary sacred site of lotus blooming in Tibetan Buddhism, is located in the deep valley of Brahmaputra Gorge, Yunnan Province. As the only county that has not built any road connecting it to the outside world, it is locked in the valley by snowy mountains and can only be reached during two or three months in the summer when the snow begins to melt. I was there in the summer of 2003. Starting from 7/28, for the next four days and nights, I, together with my travel companion, the camera man "Youmacai", climbed the Snow Mountain, crossed the glacier, passed the valley of leeches, trekked through the areas of landslide and cliffs, and arrived at Motuo on August 1st. Visiting Motuo is a dream for every donkey friend. It is the trip I had dreamt about and prepared for two years.
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> Paiqu was the last village where we could get necessary supplies before we set out for Motuo. On July 28th, I went to buy leggings for my trip and asked a local Menba boy to show me how to use it. The boy wrapped my calf proficiently and I took the opportunity to chat with the surrounding people watching me, the only outsider besides my companion in the village. "Is it so hard to walk to Motuo? How many days does it take to

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[27] The full length of the story can be found at Sina.com

http://bbs6.sina.com.cn/myarticle/html//111/860/285/1118602857/page/page3.shtml

get there?" were the questions I asked most frequently. At Bayi, nearly all the people shook their heads at my plan. They all agreed that trekking to Motuo was beyond an ordinary person's limit, not to say a city girl like me. When I joked with those surrounding me and asked them to trek with me, they quickly shook heads, "No way! Last time a man in his thirties walked for only one day and gave up. He was crying and saying that he could not walk any longer." My "camera man", Youmacai, once teased me, "Do you know what I want to shoot on this trip? I want to capture you crying on the road." I retorted immediately: "No way. It is absolutely impossible." Yes, I have confidence in myself. Although I am a sentimental woman, hardships such as trekking will never make me cry. No matter how difficult it is, I can get over it."

Unlike Princess, Ding Dang does not believe that male donkeys should take care of female donkeys on the road. When I read her youji, I indeed admired her courage in the face of hardship and difficulties, and I was even more impressed by the feminine side she displayed in the harsh environment, such as caring for the local children, being sensitive to the needs of her travel companion, showing pity for a badly beaten horse, and cooking for her male companions and hosts. In her long and detailed youji, she honestly wrote down every difficulty she encountered as well as her fear, frustration, her joy and victory:

July 29th, rain, Paiqu – Songlinkou – Duoxiongla Snow Mountain – Daya Cave

We set out at 7a.m. and arrived at the destination at 5p.m.. Trekking 8 hours. In the early morning, the sky was covered by heavy clouds, which indicated two weeks of rainy days ahead. My heart sank. The rain would double the difficulty of climbing the mountains and passing the areas plagued with leeches! My heart sank again when I saw a boy in the group of porters who carried our luggage. He was only 13 years old and had to carry luggage weighing 60 *jin* (about

70 pounds)! I asked him when he started to work as a porter. He did not answer me but smiled at me shyly. I felt sad for him. Children of his age in the city were spoiled by their parents while this boy had already carried the burden of supporting his family by working as a porter!

7/30, rain, Dayadong – Xiaoyadong – Hanmi – Laohuzui – Ani Bridge

(Leeches, bedbugs, mice, bloody day)

Today, the leeches of Motuo went crazy, and I was crazy. Starved leeches attacked us like lunatics and I was so nervous that I almost became a lunatic too.

I was armored with outdoor clothes, a hat and leggings, but I still felt itching and ach all over my body. Youmacai and I arrived at the rest place at Ani Bridge ahead of the others. Although we took lots of pictures along the road, we were not slower. Youmacai was a "strong donkey" (*meng lv*), but he had to adjust to my speed, which is the most tiring thing in trekking. As for me, I tried my best to follow his pace so that he did not have to stop and wait for me from time to time.

7/31, rain, Ani – Beibeng

I have had acrophobia since I was a little girl, but I had to walk over three hanging bridges and a number of single-trunk bridges (*dumu qiao*) today! From time to time, I paused in the middle of the bridge and felt faint. I kept telling myself not to be afraid and to look straight ahead. I did not want others to carry me over the bridge and I believed that I could do it. And I really made it!

Youmacai once criticized me for being too stubborn and wanting to do everything by myself. In fact, I refuse help from others not because I was so proud as to think that I was capable of doing everything, but because I knew I was weak. I was afraid that if I got used to the help, I would become so dependent that I would not know what to do if I was left alone. This is

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what I have learned in this cruel world. You cannot count on anyone except yourself. There were times when I was trapped in the middle of the bridge that I did wish there were helpful hands that I could reach to. But, maybe I was indeed stubborn; I never spoke up and asked for help.

Another challenge was crossing a landslide. The road was actually not for travelers but for horses. I moved as slowly as I could, half squatting and looking straight ahead. Once I was following Mr. Wang, a businessman from Sichuan, and he was a few steps ahead of me. At one point I was hesitant about where to put my foot down, I saw him coming back towards me. I intuitively thought he was coming back for me, so I shouted aloud that I was okay. But he ignored my words. When he drew near, I noticed that his legs were trembling and his face was pale. He said that he could walk no more and somebody should come to hold him to go through. "It was no joke to fall into the river," he said. I was dumbfounded. A man who admitted his weakness in front of a woman had to be extremely exhausted and helpless! I felt very sympathetic towards him.

8/1, rain, Beibeng – Motuo

After 11 hours trekking, we finally arrived at the sacred place where lotuses bloom.

Soon after we set out in the morning, I suddenly felt discomfort in my stomach. How I wished there was a toilet on the road. But the reality was there were cliffs on both sides of the road and there was no place to hide. I could do nothing but ask Youmacai and another guy to watch for me at two ends of the road. For these days on the road, whenever I needed to "resolve personal problems", I would ask my male companion to go ahead and I would catch up. They all knew what I meant and often waited for me somewhere out of sight. I really wished I were a male at the moment like that…

8/2, sunny, Motuo

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I woke up late this morning. Finally I did not have to force myself out of bed early in the morning. Since I had lost contact with the outside world for almost a week, the first thing I did after I got up was to call home.

Every time I traveled, I would tell my mom that I was with other donkey friends and it was not dangerous. I called home every day as long as the cell phone signal was strong enough. My mom knew I was often alone and the trip was dangerous, but she never said anything to me. I called my mom and heard her say, be careful of the landslides. I was surprised, how could she know? "I read your books about Motuo so I knew where it is!" Mom said proudly. I have always thought that my mom was the most open-mined mom. She loved me but never restrained me. She knew that I was not a "bird in the cage." While her daughter freely pursued her dream, she had to bear more worries than other moms. My dearest mom, I am your happiest daughter!

8/3, rain/sunny, Motuo

Today I became a housewife. One of our travel companions, a local man, planned to host a lunch at home for all of us who had traveled together all these days. I would be in charge of cooking for all eight people. This was the best lunch we had in Motuo. Because I prefer vegetables, I made the decision that the main dishes would be vegetables. It was the first time for me to cook over a fireplace, and I was all sweaty working in the hot and humid kitchen. Youmacai teased me, "few people have had this chance to be a cook in Motuo, and you were one in a thousand." He was right, and I was proud of and enjoyed the whole process. I did not let anyone of them "step in" my work place in the kitchen. We had a cheerful lunch, and we did not finish it until 3 pm. All the dishes were swept away. I was thrilled by the sense of achievement.

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8/6 – 8/8 Back from Motuo

It took us two days to trek from Motuo to 80K[28] where we could no longer walk and caught a truck taking us to the outside world. Local people used the sliding rope bridge as one means of transportation. I struggled about whether to give it a try. I would never forget the feeling when they tied me onto the rope, with my feet tied to the rope, my back against the roaring river and my face staring at the glaring sun above. I shouted that I gave up and to put me down! Youmacai stood there and just watched as if he did not hear me. After several minutes he burst out laughing, "That is enough, let her down." I then realized that he was teasing me and trying to catch a scene with me crying. After they put me down, I stamped my feet and told him, "I would have cried the next second if they had not let me down." It was the most horrible and embarrassing experience of the trip.

Before we reached 108K, we were all exhausted. Youmacai told me later that he was so tired that he could not breathe for a second. He was worried about me, but just too tired to take care of me. I said, "Now you see why I always insist that we have to take care of ourselves." He finally admitted that I was right. Taking care of oneself and knowing one's limits are two outdoor principles for me. Don't put hope in others, and you have to help yourself.

Lack of food became the last straw. We were running out of instant food, chocolate, and glucose drinks. When the last two candies were only thing we had left, I gave them to Youmacai. He was carrying the heavier backpack and running all over the place to take pictures, and he was more exhausted than I was. He did not know that was the only thing we had left.

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[28] 80K (80 kilometers) is how backpackers name a place in Motuo, indicating how far they are away from Motuo.

We arrived at 80K just before I became desperate. From then on, we finally said good-bye to Motuo, the place I had dreamed of for so long and the place I had finally measured with my own feet.

5.4   FEMALE DONKEY FRIEND, MM, AND NEOLOGISM

The term MM is so popular in contemporary Chinese popular culture that it has been listed in the Wikipedia online encyclopedia. It is defined as "babe" or "hottie" as used in Chinese Internet parlance, literally meaning "little sister" or young girl. While the original term for little sister sounds like "beautiful eyebrows" in Taiwanese accent, mainland youth jokingly coined this new term – beautiful eyebrow (Mei Mei in third and second tone respectively), to replace the original Chinese term for little sister, later abbreviated as MM. Both "beautiful eyebrows" and MM have been widely used on the Internet and later in mass media, and have increasingly replaced "funü", "nüxing", and "nüren" as common signifiers referring to women in popular discourse and in various public spaces. As I asked Gi how she distinguished these terms, she said to me: "Since I'm married, I can accept being called 'nüren,' but not 'funü' which sounds so revolutionary, and should refer to women of the older generations. 'Nüxing' is okay but it is often used in a writing context and not in everyday conversations. I like MM best because literally 'beautiful eyebrows' signifies beauty and femininity, and it sounds like 'little sister,' which makes one feel young. Doesn't every woman want to be beautiful and forever young?"

As Barlow has contended, neologisms are not only linguistic signs but also entry points into social norms (2004: 15). She suggests using historical catachresis to understand the history of women in Chinese feminism. As she explains, "Conventionally, catachresis refers to a

particular misuse of a proper noun, where the term's referent is, theoretically or philosophically speaking, inadequate. … When reconsidered as historical catachresis, ubiquitous, descriptive, proper nouns become legible repositories of social experience. (2004: 1)"

Following Barlow, I argue that the examination of neologisms or the new catachresis MM in contemporary China points to the understanding of its ideation and the lived experience of women in contemporary China. Although, as Barlow suggested, the new terms, once coined, have diffused and powerful ability to explain everyday life and to justify, define and stabilize our activities, I want to draw upon the ways in which MM is appropriated and manipulated by female donkey friends and demonstrate that the neologism can also be a vessel for many women to (re)assert agency, femininity and subjectivity in contemporary China.

Barlow has studied the ways in which Chinese women have been represented, appropriated, and motivated by the historical catachreses since the eighteenth century. "Funü" was used in mainstream Confucian regulative gender theory between the eighteenth and the early twentieth century, and the term signified the "collectivity of kinswomen in the semiotics of Confucian family doctrine" (2004: 37). At the turn of the century when Chinese revolutionaries struggled to rewrite the past as a backward and dead tradition, intellectuals, creative writers, and social activists invented the word "nüxing" to erect a progressive and liberated female image. It was recognized that from the very beginning, the nüxing category of women was deployed in Chinese masculinist and nationalist concerns of building nation and state to save China from its shameful weakness in the world (Yang 1999: 40). Since then "women" have always been a metaphor for the nation and thus carries the anxiety when national salvation fails. The legacy of linking the liberation of women with the needs of the nation and state continued to expand in the Maoist era. The Maoist state disregarded nüxing for its bourgeois, westernized, and individualist

connotations, and refashioned funü as a state subject, subordinated to the dominant categories of class, that "stood for the collectivity of all politically normative or decent women" (Barlow 2004: 38). Many have noted the "the erasure of gender and sexuality" as well as the masculinization of women's bodies in the Maoist era (Yang 1999) Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002). It was not until the shift to a market economy and economic reforms that the figure of a sexualized woman under the term nüxing resurfaced in public and private contests.

In this newly emerged consumer culture that is based on gender bifurcation and the exaggeration of sexuality, many scholars express their concerns about the ascendancy of the male gaze and masculine sexuality's domination that has increasingly positioned women as the object of the male gaze and desire (Yang 1999, Evans 2000, Barlow 2004). Evans argues that the production of diversified media images of women, such as the images of beautiful young women, satisfied sexual partners, and contented housewives, are not only important in that women and men acquire a sense of themselves as "having a gender", but also significant "as indicators of the ways in which state and market…make use of… women's bodies for commercial and political purposes" (Evans 2000: 221).

At first glance, the newly invented term MM is inevitably subject to this consumer culture and ascending male gaze and desire. While it is true that if you Google "beautiful eyebrows" in Chinese characters, you will find numerous pornographic websites as well as thousands of websites dealing with sexuality, fashion, games, and love matches, I want to stress its heterogeneous contents and the role that the term has played in female donkey friends' storytelling and lived experiences. The increasing replacement of nüxing and funü with MM or "beautiful eyebrows" in popular discourses and in many public and private places does not just bring about erotic and romantic imagining of a female body favored by the male gaze, but has

opened up new opportunities and spaces for Chinese women to reassert and reinterpret their femininity and self-identity.

It is hard to trace when donkey friends first used the term MM to refer to female donkey friends and invented the corresponding term – GG (gege), literally meaning elder brother – to refer to male donkey friends. Regardless of age differences, female donkey friends are known as "little sisters" and male donkey friends are "elder brothers." As I have described in the previous chapters, when you sign up for a trip you have to follow this format: your ID, gender: GG or MM, contact phone number, equipment (tent, sleeping bag, stove and so on), and sometimes, a brief resume of previous travel experience. You refer to someone in your group as GG or MM, not according to their age but merely depending on their gender. When you assign a job in your group, you should know that GG will carry tents and stoves, and be in charge of setting up tents and taking care of those heavy and dirty jobs, while MM carry snacks, and are in charge of food preparation and cooking. In contrast to "beautiful eyebrows"' glamorous and made-up faces and fashionable female dress styles in mass media representations, MM donkey friends often wear plain colors, unisex, by no means cheap, outdoor clothes. But unlike the women who wore loose-fitting blouses and bulky jackets in black and gray in the Maoist era, in order to hide their gender differences and get away from bourgeois lifestyles, MM donkey friends often spend more than one thousand RMB on Garmont mountain shoes or a Columbia outdoor jacket. Princess admitted that she probably spent one third of her monthly salary to purchase professional outdoor clothing that was carefully chosen for the brands, colors and tailored details. In fact, in an outdoor context, MM dressed in skirts and walking in high heels are often the object of derision not because that they do not look good but because such femininity is misplaced. Skirts, high heels and make-up are proper in the offices, parties and other urban contexts, but not at all appropriate

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in rural areas, on mountains and by the rivers. Wearing outdoor clothing is not only a necessity to protect herself outdoors, but also a way for a MM to articulate a new kind of femininity that does not project an erotic and romantic female image under the male gaze, but a sporty, healthy, and energetic image for its own sake.

Female donkey friends do not reject the fact that they are women and they are different from men, in fact, they manipulate the term MM to stress gender differences and achieve their own goals. When I asked many female donkey friends if they felt inferior by being called "little sister," they were always surprised at my question since they either never thought about it or did not feel inferior at all. They liked the connotation of the term that females are young, pretty, and should be taken care of. "'Being taken care of' does not necessarily mean inferiority. Women can still maintain their integrity and dignity while being taken care of," Gi said to me. Gi, Princess, and Ding Dang's stories all acknowledge that female donkey friends are, in fact, weaker than males in terms of physical strength, but they took it for granted and all expressed an appreciation of their male travel companions who displayed the "spirit of a gentleman" on the road. In Princess' golden triangle composed of one MM and two GG, MM could minimize the conflict inherent in a trip composed of strangers and take advantage of the competition between two male donkey friends to have her wish granted. Ding Dang was strong enough to trek through the snow mountains and landslides; she was honest that it was inconvenient for a female to "resolve personal problems" on the road, and she had to ask her male companions to watch for her. Gi shared with me how the only man or GG in her group took care of her and the other MM by lending his only coat to them in the cold weather. Like other female donkey friends, they do not hide the fact that they are women and that they are sometimes weak, vulnerable and emotional. They take these as indispensable parts of being a woman. Displaying their weakness

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aside, female donkey friends stress another point that they are able to face their limits and overcome the weakness by the ways they travel away from home and use their body accordingly.

5.5   SPACE AND BODY POLITICS

Chinese women in the imperial periods were to a large extent segregated from public life, which was exacerbated by the practice of foot-binding. The restriction of their physical and social mobility is also reflected in the traditional gender-based division of labor, with women confined to the domestic spheres and men controlling public affairs. The transgression of these boundaries might have caused a woman shame or loss of social virtue. Margery Wolf has put it aptly: "Only women who had gone out of the family and were therefore outside the rules of respectability appeared openly in the streets. There were the beggar women, the slave girls, the prostitutes, the vendors, the servants. Few women, no matter how close to starvation, made the decision go out easily, for there was no going back" (1985: 12).

Despite such observations, scholars have recognized that the cultural construction of "inside" and "outside" is not sufficient to describe the social reality of traditional China, nor is it homologous with dichotomies of "domestic" and "public" as often construed in Euro-American societies (Ko 1994; Rofel 1999). In her study of two generations of female workers in a silk factory in Hangzhou, Rofel found that despite the same type of activity, women who were forced to work "outside" of their family displayed embarrassment and shame which could not be found among those who worked "inside" family-run workshops. It was not the nature of the labor, but the location of the labor, that demarcated the "inside" from "outside", and the "domestic" space from "public" space (Rofel 1999: 64-73).

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Ko also criticizes the binaries such as domestic / public, nature / culture, and reproduction / production as inadequate to describe gender roles and social realities in traditional or pre-revolution China. She points out that "although often rendered in English as 'domestic' and 'public,' 'inner' and 'outer' in their Chinese contexts are always relative and relational terms" (1994: 13). The inner / outer construct does not demarcate mutually exclusive social and symbolic spaces; neither does it denote private / public activities. Ko points out that in the Qing Dynasty, the family is the very site where public morality can be exemplified. Moreover, gentrywomen traveled a great deal while they could maintain their domestic roles (Ko 1994).

The view that Chinese women were crippled by bound feet and imprisoned in their inner chambers have not only treated the inner and outer spaces as exclusively separate, but also treated Chinese women as belonging to a single basic category of subjected people (Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002: 8). In her study of the teachers of the inner chambers in seventeenth century China, Ko has portrayed a women's world larger than the inner domestic domain (1994: 1), as she writes:

> Geographical confines were the least troublesome boundaries that gentry poets negotiated. Traveling was indeed quite common for women from scholar-official families in seventeenth-century Jiangnan. Whether a local excursion or a trek across provinces, traveling was not perceived as a violation of the domestic woman's propriety. As the itinerant artist Huang Yuanjie argued, the virtues of domesticity and purity depended more upon a woman's moral intentions – her subjective will – than the physical location of her body (1994: 220-221).

Besides crossing physical boundaries, gentrywomen traversed the domain of the inner chambers by building women's communities and forging friendship ties with other women based

on their common appreciation of literature and interests in writing (Ko 1994). It can be seen that travel and writing were two significant means for women to cross both physical and social boundaries, as well as negotiate and express their feminine identities. Their transgressive activities also rendered the borders between inner and outer, and between private and public, ambivalent, shifting, and open to negotiation (Ko 1994: 14).

Like the heroines in the inner chambers in pre-communist China, female donkey friends of today are again using travel and writing to portray their world and negotiate their femininity and feminine identities. Many female donkey friends admit that traveling to out of the way places with strangers often causes anxiety and worry among their family members and friends. For example, Gi's husband was so concerned about Gi's travel activities, not only because she crossed spatial boundaries between home and outside world, but also because she transgressed her role as a wife whose primary responsibility was supposed to be to take care of domestic chores. Therefore, it can be seen that it is not only the spatial crossing but also the social transgression that really threatens the demarcation of inner and outer spaces for women. Socializing and making friends with strangers, especially male strangers, was the most important reason for pre-revolutionary silk factory workers to feel more embarrassed than their counterparts working in family workshops (Rofel 1999). Today, women taking jobs as public relations ladies (*gongguan xiaojie*), domestic workers (*baomu*), sales persons, and insurance ladies are still stigmatized for the fact that they have to socialize with strangers rather than with relatives within the household and colleagues within the work unit.

One example of this transgression by donkey friends is that male and female donkey friends share one tent. It is not uncommon for donkey friends of different sexes to share a single tent in an outdoor environment. When I joined the trip to Inner Mongolia, I was assigned to a

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tent with several women. The next morning when I got up, I noticed one of the girls was missing. I was told that she brought her own tent and had slept there with a male donkey friend the previous night. I was shocked since I knew that they had just met and were not a couple. What surprised me most was that no one else seemed surprised. "It is common in the outdoor environment," they told me. The reason that the girl asked her male companion to sleep in her tent was that she was so petite and light that she was afraid that the tent would blow away without a male donkey friend to weigh it down. According to donkey friends, sharing a tent does not inspire erotic and romantic imagination as much as contrasting images of strong and protective males and petite females. I asked both male and female donkey friends if sexual harassment ever happened when they shared tents with members of the opposite sex. They all laughed and answered "No." "Even though we do have some 'bad ideas' in our heads, we will restrain ourselves since we are under the 'public' eye. What's more, we will lose our reputation once and for all if we do anything like that." Female donkey friends are well aware of the surveillance and disciplinary gaze provided by the "public" community, so that they can enjoy protection from males without risking anything as would be the case in other spatial and social contexts.

The transgressions of female donkey friends that point to a contrast between a domestic world and an outside world of strangers, often creates conflict with their family members. One way to resolve this problem, as in Gi's case, is to retreat to the domestic world and repress her travel interests for the sake of marriage. However, there is another way to negotiate feminine roles on the road, which is to combine domestic responsibilities with travel, thus render the borders between the inner and outer spaces ambivalent. As such a female donkey friend can maintain the role of wife, daughter or mother. Trekking with a male donkey friend for four days

and nights, and, sometimes, sharing one tent with him, Ding Dang seems to have transgressed the most intimate boundary – the very personal space of sleeping, which is usually reserved exclusively for family members. Ding Dang nevertheless preserved aspects of her feminine role by taking care of the domestic chores such as food preparation, cooking and recording financial items. In her youji, Ding Dang described how she felt a strong sense of achievement after the guests finished all the dishes she cooked, rather than after she trekked for four days and nights. Despite the toughness and endurance demonstrated by female donkey friends, they seem especially proud when their cooking skills are appreciated, as well as their other feminine features such as carefulness and prudence are well understood and praised.

Negotiating their femininity as contained in domestic female roles aside, female donkeys also distinguish themselves from both the glamorous and flirtatious image of MM for the male gaze, and the image of pale and weak white-collar ladies. Gi and Ding Dang narrated the difficulties they experienced on the road and the exhausted state of their bodies in detail. This not only shows their toughness and diligence as women, but also serves as a critique of the urban lifestyle that restricts women within households, offices, and shopping malls. Gi told in her story how she first decided to quit her job, rather than sitting in front of a computer in the limited office space day after day; she chose to take responsibility for her body and chose how to use her energy and strength. Although in the end, she decided to find a job and return home as a qualified wife, she considered herself different from those who never crossed the border to go outside and explore a snowy mountain.

As daughter, wife, and in some of cases, mother, different female donkey friends negotiate their roles as women differently. But like Princess, Gi, and Ding Dang, they realize that they are women before they become donkey friends. Rather losing their femininity as a traveler

on the road, they try to reinforce certain feminine characteristics such as being gentle, sensitive, kind and prudent. At the same time they articulate a new kind of femininity that stresses independence, health, toughness and perseverance. In the storytelling of female donkey friends, they do not deny gender differences; on the contrary, they are well aware of their bodily limitations. They frequently described the particular difficulties that they had to face on the road as women. Princess faced the inconvenience of taking shower in a hotel room shared with two male donkeys. Ding Dang claimed how difficult it was to go to the bathroom on the road. Conscious of their bodily limitations, they found ways to appeal to their male travel companions for help and cooperation. In so doing, they maintained their femininity and at the same time gained the understanding and respect from fellow donkey friends.

5.6   CONCLUSION

Travel, as a lived experience, and writing, as an articulation of self identity, are two significant ways through which female travelers come to assert their femininity and gendered identity in contemporary China. This chapter has drawn upon the life stories of three female donkey friends to show what travel has meant to them and how they appropriated travel to articulate their sense of self and of femininity. In their stories, Gi, Princess, and Ding Dang all had clear motivations and goals for travel. For Gi, travel is to regain the meaning and significance of life. Princess traveled to measure each inch of the earth with her feet so that she could claim villages and towns as her own. Ding Dang endured difficulties and traveled to challenge her physical and psychological limits. The endurance and independence of these female donkey friends also poses challenges to their fellow male donkey friends. As Gi noticed, her male companion was forced to

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continue to trek as long as girls still persisted. Ding Dang realized that her "camera man" was trying hard to catch her with his camera crying on the way to Motuo, but she vowed that he would never do so. Moreover, she repeatedly refused offers of help from male companions because she believed that she had to take care of herself.

These images of independent and courageous women travelers contrast sharply with the inviting, sensual and erotic images of MM in popular and mass media. The irony lies in the fact that female donkey friends adopt the term MM to claim their femininity vis-à-vis GG, the gentlemanlike hero in an outdoor environment. MM donkeys not only maintain their feminine gender roles by taking care of domestic work and letting GG take care of heavy and dirty jobs, but also imbue this image with such qualities as independence, toughness, and open-mindedness. In so doing, they are able to enjoy and appreciate the service and good will of their male counterparts without losing their initiative and self-determination. As a matter of fact, some MM travelers, such as Princess, can manipulate their feminine identity so well that they can achieve what they want on the road with a "golden triangle" arrangement of companionship. The ability of these female donkey friends to decide what to do with their bodies – either spending time and energy in the office or at home or on the road – has allowed them to cast criticism on the "ideal" images of modern females as successful office ladies and housewives, who are viewed as weak, unhealthy, and dependent. For a female donkey friend, spending one third of her salary on outdoor gear, backpacks and mountain shoes, instead of an expensive cosmetics and name-brand fashion, is an investment in her hobby, health, social and cultural capital, significant constituent elements of her realization and representation of who she is, what she does, and why she is different. The distinguished image of female donkey friends has pointed to the possibilities of an alternative kind of femininity in contemporary China, a female who is able to return the male

gaze, take the initiative to define her gender role and individuality, and to criticize those images of women as either powerful or attractive, that images have been widely circulated and consumed in a neoliberal world.

6.0   THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERE IN DONKEY FRIEND COMMUNITIES

6.1   THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Scholarly interest in searching for possible sites of Chinese civil society and the public sphere has grown dramatically in recent years – from a special issue of *Modern China* (1993) dedicated to the studies of the emerging public sphere and civil society in China to hundreds of new publications each year a decade later (see especially Yang 1994a 1994b; White et al. 1996; Saich 2000; Yang 2005). Historically, the development of a market economy gave rise to the emergence of capitalism as a distinct economic system and the separation between state and society in the West. The notions of civil society and public sphere were developed in eighteenth-century Western Europe at the inception of capitalism for the new bourgeoisie to come together against the absolutist state. Civil society in this sense exists over and against the state, in partial independence from it, including those dimensions of social life which cannot be confounded with, or swallowed up by the state (Taylor 1990; Keane 1988). The public sphere, most thoroughly elaborated by Habermas, refers to an intermediate space between civil society and the state, wherein "critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed" (Habermas 1989: 1).

Because these notions are inextricably connected to the rise of the bourgeoisie and tied to a particular historical setting in the West, many scholars have struggled with the legitimacy and

sufficiency of applying the terms to an understanding of China (Wakeman 1993, Huang 1993, Yang 1994a). Many have shared Rowe's concern as he asks whether "we [are] justified in expecting China to have had, or to have required, anything like the complex of attitudes, values, and institutions that we amalgamate and reify under the term civil society", and whether "we are … presuming a 'normal' path of sociopolitical development, transcending the specificities of local culture" (1993: 139). To solve this dilemma, some scholars tend to treat civil society and the public sphere as terms of social practice so that they can be universally applied to give a better understanding of China (Wakeman 1993). Some go even further by evoking the terms not as a descriptive empirical task, but a performative act "in which to search for its traces is at the same time to invoke the non-state sphere and make it a conscious project" (Yang 1994a: 288).

Others have tried to break down the concepts into more manageable components and look for elements and preconditions of civil society and the public sphere in historical and contemporary China. These studies have focused mainly on two historical periods: one in the late Qing and Republican periods, and the other more recent, beginning with the economic reforms of the 1980s. Both periods have seen the rise of a market economy and the expansion of private economic sectors. As a result, in late imperial and early republican China, intermediate and voluntary associations and sites for public discussion emerged, including guilds and philanthropic associations (Rowe 1984 1993, Strand 1989), teahouses and wine-shops (Rowe 1990, 1993, Strand 1989), and poetry and academic societies (Polachek 1992, Rankin 1993). In fact, since as early as seventeenth-century China, along with the monetization of silver and the boom in commercial publishing, literate women had already formed networks and communities in the form of reading group (Ko 1994). Ko points out that this reading public of women that emerged in the late Ming Dynasty was more an extension of the traditional elite than its enemy,

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and thus does not carry the connotations of "public sphere". Nevertheless, through their writing, reading, and sharing with like-minded readers, these women could creatively craft a space that gave them meaning, solace, and dignity (9, 35).

As has been aptly pointed out, the Communist Revolution rooted out all these traditions of voluntary association and replaced them with a "mono-organizational" society in which all organizations were linked and subject to the state apparatus (Yang 1989, 1994a, 1994b). In the reform era, the spread of market relations and expansion of private economic sectors have led to a reinvention of voluntary organizations in many social domains of activity, ranging from stamp-collecting clubs to film critics clubs, to private entrepreneurs' associations (White et al 1996, Yang 1994b). In the book *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China*, the authors studied the changes of existing official mass organizations, as well as the emergence of new types of social organizations in both incorporated and interstitial sectors. They paid particular attention to the formation of entrepreneurial associations. They argued that the post-Mao market reforms have "fostered an increasing differentiation and pluralization of interests in society, and opened up a realm of social space within which individuals and groups can … establish autonomous, self-regulating organizations to further their aims" (White et al. 1996: 9-10).

Despite these findings about the preconditions and elements of civil society and the public sphere in historical and contemporary China, some scholars are hesitant to impose these notions on China's particular social and historical context. For example, Wakeman (1993) has contested the extent to which the intermediate associations, such as commercial guilds, were autonomous and separate from the state in late imperial China. By the same token, many scholars have pointed out the state's penetration into and control of social organizations in the reform era.

For example, White et al admit that the development of many social organizations studied in fact reflected a process of incorporation. Each social organization had to be affiliated with a supervisory body, "which acted as a sponsor and was responsible for supervising the day-to-day affairs of its dependent associations … thus the relationship between the affiliated social organization and its supervisory department is one of both control and co-operation" (1996: 103). In her field research in China in the late 1980s, Yang also pointed out that, although the Chinese constitution guaranteed citizens "the right to form associations," in reality the Party would not allow truly independent organizations, and any social group formation had to be supervised by a responsible branch of the state organization (Yang 1994a: 293-294).

In line with these critical reflections, Huang argues that the binary oppositions between state and civil society, and the public and the private, upon which notions of civil society and the public sphere are predicated, are not appropriate for China. He proposes a trinary conception, the third realm *between* state and society, within which both participate (1993: 216), to replace the previous value-laden terms. In a similar manner, Yang proposes the native term *minjian*, a transitional space between the state and society, to describe the social fabric from which social organizations are created and interact with the state.

Yang argued that the development of civil society and the public sphere in the West had depended upon the enlightenment notions of individual rights and free association of people, which were lacking in the formation of the Chinese minjian. She suggested that minjian might not have been predicated on individual subjectivities and rights, but has "most likely fueled by a discourse of relatedness and obligations" (1994a: 298-299). Therefore, according to Yang, the art of guanxi played a more important role in the formation of Chinese minjian than independent associations and groups. The art of guanxi privileges neither the individual nor the group or

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association, but operates instead in the space *between* the individual and society. Yang observed in the 1980s and early 1990s, that due to a lack of voluntary associations allowed by the state, the guanxi relationships were largely geographically bounded and subject to social conditions and norms. Guanxi practices enabled people to secure scarce goods and redistribute what the state economy had already distributed, thus circumventing the disciplining techniques of the state in socialist China. By the same token, by evoking guanxi practices and giving gifts, people were able to reverse the hierarchical relations dictated by the state and market. It is in this sense that the art of guanxi gained subversive power and was able to serve as an autonomous social domain of the minjian operating both within and without the state (1994a: 286).

This said, Yang also admitted even as she was writing,

It is not clear whether the minjian realm in China can only assume the form of guanxi networks and quasi-groups for the time being. Most likely, this form is only a transitional phase, so that once the state can guarantee the legitimacy of formal associations, through a working legal system that actually protects the right to group formation, quasi-groups can be transformed into open associations that contribute to the welfare of a community or the larger public (1994a: 305).

In this chapter, I would like to address Yang's speculation raised more than fifteen years ago. I will address the question of the possibility of developing a public sphere based on voluntary groups and free associations operating outside of the state in post-reform China. Despite the fact that China still lacks a legal system to protect free association, the last decade has seen the relationship between the state and society change as a consequence of the retreat of state control from many realms of public life since the 1980s (Davis et al 1995; Davis 2000; Chen et al 2001; Bruun 1993; Hertz 1998; Yang 1994a, 1994b; Yan 2000; Kipnis 1997). Clubs

and interest groups have emerged as they can evade the supervision of the state by registering as private enterprises. Information and technology revolutions also took place during the fifteen years since Yang's research to enable numerous voluntary associations to form from below, among like-minded people with the aid of the Internet. I will argue that although many of them are apolitical, these associations nevertheless provide a training ground for critical public reflection, and will eventually contribute to the development of civil society and the public sphere in post-socialist China.

Scholars have called the radical socioeconomic transformation that took place in post-socialist China a "revolution of consumption" (Davis 2000: 2). A thriving market accompanied by the development of technology has not only affected every aspect of urban life, but also nurtured the transformation of social relationships and given rise to new citizen subjectivities. As The retreat of the state from many public realms of people's lives combined with the rapid development of the Internet has led to the emergence and flourishing of interest groups and clubs of like-minded people in the Chinese urban landscape. They constitute a new public sphere that is now based on individuality and free association, and this public sphere has increasingly replaced the previous minjian that operated within the "discourse of relatedness and renqing obligations" (Yang 1994a). Private individuals who participate in this new public sphere will not necessarily oppose the state directly, but rather engage in raising public consciousness and resolving social problems. In previous chapters, I have discussed the development of new types of social networks and urban subjectivities that have emerged out of the donkey friend phenomenon. In this chapter, I will put the pieces together and focus on the overall effect of the abovementioned changes that have taken place in urban private and social lives. I will provide concrete examples of how donkey friends mobilize collective actions, raise public consciousness,

and promote democratic values through a variety of travel and non-travel activities. In the end, I will propose that the Chinese urban landscape is undergoing critical structural transformation, marked by a burgeoning public sphere in which new middle class citizens participate by engaging in public discussions and collective actions within voluntary associations. This transformation should not be dismissed as something temporary or contingent. It is of vital importance because it has deeply affected urban lifestyles, personal choices and desires, collective identities and public consciousness.

6.2   THE PUBLIC SPHERE WITHIN A DONKEY FRIEND CLUB

6.2.1   The Café

Sitting in the Club's café in Beijing one typical sizzling hot summer afternoon, I was waiting to see River Fish, one of the owners of the café and the Travel and Photograph Club. The café was part of the Club and served as a meeting place for Club members. It was open to the public, but still most customers were members or friends of the Club. If there were no seminars or gatherings held in the café, it was usually quiet and empty. The seeming loneliness of the café is partly due to its awkward geographical location. It was located on the side road of the East Third Ring Road. Although nestled in the Central Business District (CBD) of Beijing and just a few blocks from the famous Sanlitun Bar Street, it was shadowed by the surrounding high-rises and separated from the neighboring commercial districts by the main road of East Third Ring. What's more, the café was in a basement of an outdoor supply shop, which further increased the difficulty of finding it if one did not already know the place well.

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When I went downstairs and walked into the café, I found myself in a well-decorated room. The walls were painted dark red, the tables were covered with checker-patterned cloth, and the lighting was reasonably arranged, all of which seemed to speak to the middle class taste of the owners of the café. The room was decorated with photos taken by donkey friends, embedded in hand-made frames and hung on the wall. The space in the room was divided by book shelves into several sections. There was a variety of travel-related books, magazines, guidebooks, maps and pictorials, alphabetically arranged on the shelves. I was surprised to find a shelf holding some hundred volumes of *National Geographic* magazine in English from 1960 all the way through the most current issue! I was amazed not only at the comprehensiveness and variety of the owners' collection but also at the degree to which knowledge and information are circulated around the world today. Like the Chinese audience who can download and watch the most recent American episodes from BT services, Chinese donkey friends are now reading the most current *National Geographic*, referring to the most popular guidebook – *Lonely Planet*, and debating the most pressing environmental issues, such as global warming and sustainable development. This café and many similar meeting places of donkey friends in Beijing, Shanghai, Lijiang, Lhasa etc. have become significant nodes of a large network of communication and information exchange, where like-minded travelers no longer limit their interests to travel only, but use knowledge and information gained from a wide variety of sources to participate in intellectual discussion and reasoned debate regarding many domestic and global issues.

Throughout the interview with River Fish, I had to remind him to focus on the Club and café for he often brought up current social affairs and political issues. I should note that this did not occur very often, nor were all donkey friends interested in discussing politics. However, as River Fish reasoned, "everything can lead to political debate, ranging from discussing the rise in

gasoline prices to criticizing the overdevelopment of a tourist zone." I had to agree with him as I had heard nearly every donkey friend talk about those issues and others that led to critical reflection and debate. River Fish's interest in politics might be attributed to both his personality and his position as one of the Club's organizers. From his youji quoted earlier in chapter 4, it should be evident that River Fish has a very idealistic, sentimental and sensitive personality. As one of the earliest donkey friends in Beijing who witnessed the establishment of the first donkey friend club and the popularity of this travel style among urban young people, he was proud and confident. He and Dan, the woman co-owner of the Club, founded the Travel and Photography Club and café as early as 2001, when donkey friend travel was only acknowledged by a small number of people in Beijing. As this travel style became more popular and increasing numbers of people joined, the Club grew from a small membership of one hundred to two thousand today. The Club not only helped initiate trips for donkey friends but also organized seminars, exhibitions, and a variety of volunteer projects in which donkey friends could take part.

When River Fish finally showed up on this particular afternoon, I stole a look at my watch. To my surprise, he was on time. I knew that he was busy finding a new location for his café because he had just ended the previous contract with his landlord who ran a shop in the same building. According to River Fish, the end of the contract was inevitable because they had different visions about running the Club: his landlord expected him to make a profit, but he just wanted to run it like a non-profit organization, a grassroots association that provided a free and independent space for donkey friends. When I asked him why he was so persistent, he thought for a while, and began to tell me the story behind this café:

> Opening this café is like a dream come true for me. When I was studying at Beijing
> University, I began to travel around. I was a member of the Mountaineering Association

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of Beijing University then. But most of the time, I traveled with like-minded people known from personal networks. It can be said that we were first-generation donkey friends. Every time we came back to the city, we felt eager to find a place to share our experiences and show souvenirs and photos from the trips. But it was difficult to do so. A restaurant seemed to be the only place for us to meet and talk, but the environment was really chaotic and noisy. Then I wondered what if I had a café where like-minded people could meet? This idea eventually evolved into today's Travel and Photograph café. So you see, the café is like a utopian world for me and my friends; how can I make money off of my friends?

When River Fish graduated from college, there were already informal associations of donkey friends, such as Lvye.org and Sanfo.com. He made a lot of friends through these associations, and when the time was ripe, he invited Dan to start the Travel and Photography Club. However, it was difficult to register the Club as a minjian association without a supervisory work unit in China, so River Fish proposed to open a café which could serve their goals. At the same time, under the cover of a café they could register it as a business and circumvent the complicated registration with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. In the end, River Fish and Dan registered the café with the local Industrial & Commercial Administration Bureau.

In China, it is not rare to register an organization as a business, but then run it as an independent social club. In fact, none of the donkey friend communities I joined was an official minjian organization: Lvye operated under the personal website "Lvye.org," Cherokee Team operated under the umbrella of Sina.com, the Travel and Photography Club operated as a café, and a few more operated under the auspices of an outdoor gear franchise. Attached to a website, café or store, the running of these organizations is either cost free or self-sufficient.

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Economically and administratively independent of the state, these social clubs are able to gather a great number of like-minded people and organize a wide range of activities without the approval and supervision of the upper supervisory work unit. River Fish was proud that his Club was a "pure land" (*jingtu*) free of government control, where donkey friends could express their opinions and pursue their interests freely. As he recalled:

> On May 26, 2001, our café was open. Following that, we not only organized mountaineering and camping activities and trips but also held seminars once or twice a week. During these five years, we have arranged hundreds of seminars on topics ranging from geography to ecology, and from photography to visual anthropology. Among our guest speakers, there have been scientists, professional photographers, anthropologists, artists, free lancers, journalists, and experienced (*zishen*) "donkeys" who have set feet on the most off-beat places. If I calculate it correctly, there have been more than ten thousand people coming to these seminars, and more than eighty each time.

I attended the Club seminar several times, and each time I had to call to reserve a seat beforehand. Once, River Fish invited a British guest speaker, an advisor for the movie *Vertical Limit*, to give a talk about rock climbing. But most of the times I went, there were simply donkey friends talking about their travels. A male donkey friend talked about his trip to Xinjiang, a couple shared their travel stories about riding a bicycle from Beijing to Lhasa, donkey friends presented their photos and discussed photography, and so on. The café came to life on these seminar nights. People filled the place, and the cook, River Fish's girlfriend, was busy serving food and drinks, while speakers were occupied with setting up laptops and projectors. During the seminars, sometimes there were light-hearted jokes and sometimes there were more serious dialogues, depending on the topic. Once the authors of the book *Two-Man Long March*

(McEwen and Jocelyn 2005) came to show the photos they took on the road following the route of the Long March. Andrew, an English speaker, showed a photo in which the villagers wrote on the wall "people need freedom" (*renmin xuyao ziyou*). William said that the Hong Kong version of the book published this photo, but the mainland publisher warned him that the book would not get published if the picture was there. The audience laughed. More serious talk took place when members shared their opinions about the desertification of the grasslands in Inner Mongolia. No matter whether it was casual sharing or serious debate, these seminars maintained a free and open atmosphere. People were often excited to attend these seminars, as one donkey friend wrote on the Internet, "Last night when I came back from attending a seminar at the Travel and Photograph café, I got caught in a thunderstorm. … I met some donkey friends in the same shelter and found that they were also coming back from the same seminar. We continued the discussion ardently as if we were old friends. We were all wet but we were all very excited…"

Figure 6 A Seminar on Travel in Xinjiang

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In eighteenth-century Europe, the prosperity of the coffee house, salons, and table societies provided a "forum in which private people come together to form a public" and thus offered a "training ground for a critical public reflection … focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness" (Habermas 1989:25, 29). Today in contemporary urban China, I have also seen the explosion of such private clubs and associations composed of the new affluent and literate middle class that emerged as a consequence of a market economy coupled with a revolution in telecommunication and information technology. The new middle class people have more contact with the outside world, possess multiple channels for up-to-date knowledge and information, embrace egalitarian and democratic principles in the social relationships and interactions, and many of them are elite decision-makers within contemporary Chinese society. I argue that their networks and associations have constituted part of a Chinese urban public sphere in which individuals can gain emotional and intellectual support, engage in equal sharing and reasoned debate, and affect public consciousness. In the reform era, Chinese urban landscape is being continually shaped and reshaped by the emergence of new class groups and the formation of novel cultural models, accompanied by the decline of traditional social networks and lifestyles. As a result, there has been an ever-pressing demand for the development of a citizen's public sphere in which individual interests can be represented, public opinions can be formed and the process of decision-making can be informed and checked by the critical debate of the people.

In the following section, I will trace the interdependent development of new class groups and cultural models, weaving together accounts of the rise of a cyber culture in contemporary urban China, to argue that these events or "revolutions" are critical elements of a new social order, giving rise to the increasing demand for and burgeoning development of horizontal

networks, the free expression and exchange of opinions, as well as collective actions to serve individual and social welfare.

6.3   THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW CHINESE URBAN PUBLIC SPHERE

Yang has located the Chinese minjian in two "in-between" spaces: between the individual and society, and between the individual and the formal group or association (1994a: 295). In the Maoist and early reform era, the art of guanxi played a central role in providing the basis and form for the Chinese minjian. Compared to the pervasiveness of guanxi practices, the construction of the free and individual subject was weak and limited (1994a: 282). However, over the decade of the 1990s, urban residents experienced a consumer revolution at various levels. Economic reforms brought about a great many crucial changes in social status and organizational principles. On the one hand, there have emerged socio-economic groups that are increasingly separated from the state enterprises and that retain more or less autonomy in pursuing personal interests in both public and private spheres. On the other hand, the technological advances in communication have facilitated the formation of broader associations with like-minded people despite geographical and social distance. In his influential work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas pointed out the significance of the emergence of a market economy and print technology in forming the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois public sphere in Western Europe (Habermas 1989). By the same token, I argue that the rise of a consumer culture, accompanied by technological advances and the formation of new class groups in contemporary China is also contributing to the formation of new citizen

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subjectivities and associational spaces, which has led to the emergence of a new Chinese urban public sphere.

6.3.1 The New Rich

The new rich have come into being as the state claimed that "let a few get rich first, then the rest will follow suit." Since the mid-1980s, the state has steadily decreased its share of industrial production and retreated from direct economic management of enterprises. People who took the opportunity and began to accumulate wealth under the contract with the state have become the first ones to get rich; they are the owner-operators, factory managers, self-employed merchants, wealthy peasants, and private entrepreneurs (Chua 2000; Robison and Goodman 1996). Although their economic activities became more immune from direction or complete control of the state, and they would be responsible for their own profit and loss, the new rich in China are different from the bourgeoisie who were the carriers of the public in the West. The bourgeoisie – including the merchants, bankers, entrepreneurs, and manufacturers – from the beginning were excluded from state authorities and governed by horizontal economic relations instead of vertical relations of domination (Habermas 1989: 24). By contrast, it is the Chinese state that initiated the economic reforms, promoted enterprise autonomy and provided economic incentives, therefore from the very beginning the new rich have been subject to both the economic relations and vertical relations of regulation and administration from the state (Yang 1989).

The new rich remain dependent on the state for a number of reasons, such as relying on the state to gain access to resources, to support the transition to commercial viability, to place redundant workers, and to provide technical support etc. (White et al 1996). In addition, they are "not protected by property rights, the rule of law, or the support of a strong middle class, and

therefore they [are] dependent on party connections for their opportunities and survival" (Goldman 2005: 14-15). Given these limits, the burgeoning social organizations, trade unions, guild associations of entrepreneurs and business people, even though stimulated by the demand for horizontal economic relations, are inevitably embedded in corporatist relationships with the state (White et al 1996, Yang 1989, Chan 1993). The state has sought to incorporate these social organizations by requiring it to affiliate with a supervisory body and subordinate them to state control at different levels. As a result, the officially recognized social organizations of growing business and professional communities have been co-opted into the official establishment (Goldman 2005: 228). They receive certain privileged benefits from the state, but must in turn fulfill certain responsibilities; they enjoy a more or less limited degree of autonomy which is delineated and policed by state agencies (White et al 1996).

Inherent dependence on the state provisions aside, the members in the new rich group have often acquired very high economic capital and social capital accumulated with business partners and state officials, but they possess relatively low cultural and symbolic capital. Born in the fifties and sixties, many of them came of age in revolutionary China or during the Cultural Revolution, and their elder generation often belonged to the peasant and working class, who surely enjoyed more social privilege than the intellectual and literati people before and at the early stage of the reforms. They did not grow up in an environment in which they were taught how to appreciate the arts, other than singing revolutionary songs and reciting Mao Zedong's slogans, and they certainly lacked bourgeois taste such as museum going, mountain-climbing, traveling and so on. Borrowing Bourdieu's distinction between the class composed of commercial employers and the class composed of teachers and intellectuals, the Chinese new rich are those who use cultural occasions and intellectual practices as either investment in

business or opportunity for conspicuous spending: they dress up to go out, buy the most expensive seat in the most expensive theatres, collect books and antiques as decorations for their homes, and so on (Bourdieu 1984: 270). By contrast, the new Chinese middle class, or xiaozi, represent another group of people who consider themselves richest in cultural capital and (relatively) poor in economic capital. They pursue culturally legitimate and economically cheap practices like reading, visiting exhibitions, watching "art" films, budget traveling and so on. Their pursuit of maximum "cultural profit" for minimum economic cost implies "renunciation of all ostentatious expense and all gratifications other than those given by symbolic appropriation" of their endeavors (Bourdieu 1984: 270). I argue that given the embedded dependence with the state and lack of cultural reflection and critique, the new rich of Chinese entrepreneurs and business people cannot form the major force of an independent urban public sphere in contemporary China, whereas xiaozi, or China's new middle class, due to its independent existence, self-consciousness and capability for critical thinking, are most likely to become the dominant force in constituting and transforming Chinese urban public spheres.

6.3.2 Xiaozi[29]

As I have discussed, despite the increasingly accumulated economic capital, the new rich in China have not developed into the private and individual subjects in terms of socio-economic autonomy. Nor are their associations capable of constituting an independent public sphere outside the state tutelage. This said, the expansion of the private and tertiary sectors during the reform era has nevertheless led to increasing levels of social differentiation and pluralization of

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[29] I will use this native term for petit bourgeoisie as both an adjective and a noun, as it is used in Chinese.

interests among ordinary citizens. It is against this background there has emerged a more independent and idiosyncratic group – "xiaozi", which can be literally translated as petit bourgeoisie. I chose to use the native term "xiaozi" instead of "petit bourgeoisie" or "middle class" because these concepts, born in the Western contexts, carry the ideological significances that are not appropriate in describing a different social and historical context. Moreover, there exists little agreement about whether China's middle class should include the new rich or not. To avoid this confusion, I will refer to this group of people – employees of private enterprises and foreign invested companies, college students, professionals in IT and media industry, self-employed free lancers, teachers, intellectuals and other cultural producers – as "xiaozi." Lacking true bourgeois basis in Chinese society, xiaozi is not so much an independent social class confronting the dominant class as the petit bourgeoisie were in European societies in late nineteenth century. Xiaozi is more a subjective category defined by the consciousness of its members. Xiaozi connotes an idiosyncratic lifestyle and a wide range of cultural tastes. Xiaozi lifestyle includes consumption of certain cultural products and engagement in certain social and leisure activities. Xiaozi are more economically and socially independent. Unlike enterprises and business people who have to cooperate with the state apparatus to conduct business smoothly, xiaozi do not deal with the state directly and they have more autonomy in their private and social lives. If the survival of the new rich is determined by their possession of economic capital, the legitimacy of xiaozi is based more on his or her possession of cultural capital. An online article summarized a few characteristics of xiaozi:

> Hardware: they have received higher education; they have stable jobs and incomes; their salary level will be a little higher than the average but lower than the new rich.

Software: the most important thing about xiaozi is not "hardware", but software, namely the specific xiaozi taste. To draw boundaries from the ordinary people and the new rich, xiaozi advocate new trends but throw the trends away when the trends get popular. Xiaozi choose to wear casual dress of brand names of casual dress; xiaozi appreciate art and literature, xiaozi pursue a specific habit, visit a particular café, travel off the beaten tracks, and collect auteur films…

From these descriptions, it can be seen that xiaozi live by distinctions. While distinguishing themselves from the mainstream, at the same time they increasingly feel the need to associate themselves with like-minded people so that they can articulate their private and novel experiences and gain emotional and psychological support from the fellowship. In *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu described how the new petite bourgeoisie rose along with new occupations and job positions in European. Likewise, xiaozi rose along with many newly established occupations "involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services" (Bourdieu, 1984: 359). At the cultural frontier, on the one hand, xiaozi manifest a keen inclination and taste toward the refined, stylish, and artistic culture (e.g. painting, cinema, photography, novel), and on the other hand, they manifest a keen tendency of association. In other words, xiaozi culture is born not only of individual's self-perceptions, but also of their evolving relationships with other xiaozi, with the like-minded people, with the space they collectively create by reading certain books, watching certain movies, or traveling to certain places. An article from *Sanlian Life Weekly* (2001) says:

Xiaozi exist in groups. It is hard to lead a xiaozi life without belonging to a group. In a group, they share their opinions toward a book or a piece of music. The old Chinese

saying goes: to appreciate music alone is not as happy as to do it with others. Naturally, xiaozi are always eager to share after they read a book or watch a film. Xiaozi like travel too. It is again a thing of asking friends out and calling on buddies (*hupeng huanyou*). When I was in Lijiang at the eve of the New Year, I saw xiaozi in groups in every corner of the ancient town. They were hanging out together, dancing on the street, and drinking and talking in the bars.

Xiaozi lifestyle has manifested the potential for free associations of individuals; "*you*" (友 friend) relationships have become increasingly important in their lives. *You*, literally translated as friends, are now used to identify a group of people who share the common interests, preferences or life goals. For instance, people who like to take pictures are called "*sheyou*" (photography friends), people who like to drive cars are called "*cheyou*" (car friends), and people like traveling are called "*lüyou*" (travel/donkey friends). "*You*" relationship is significant in the formation of independent urban public sphere among Chinese xiaozi middle class people in that it stimulates individuals to engage in public life this is predicated on voluntary participation, grassroots initiatives and horizontal relations from below. Xiaozi culture has given rise to the formation of new citizen subjectivities and associational spaces, however if it were not for the technological revolution, namely the rise of the Internet accompanied by the prosperity of Internet forums, this new urban public sphere would not have come into being so quickly.

6.3.3 The Internet

In addition to the emergence of new cultural identities and social groups, technological developments in the means of communication have also changed the social fabric of urban China. According to statistics from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), by

the end of 2006 there were 137 million people using the Internet, accounting for 10.5% of the total population of China, 843 thousand websites on the Chinese world-wide-web, 82% of Chinese internet users choose the Internet over TV and newspaper as the main channel for acquiring information, and major activities the Internet users engage in on the web include browsing the news, searching, sending and receiving emails, posting on discussion forums (luntan) /BBS and instant communication.[30]

The Chinese government first decided that China's network should connect with the global internet in 1994. Western academics, liberal democrats and politician including the U.S. President Bill Clinton rejoiced at this and believed that the new information technology would finally lead to the breaking down of the information monopoly of the Chinese government. After nearly one decade, these Western observers have found that the Chinese government has developed new censorship skills in regulating what can or cannot appear on the Chinese internet. The Chinese government has seen the Internet as a propaganda tool but also a source of subversion. The government actually uses the most effective system and spyware technology to monitor Internet activities. The notorious "Golden Shield" project provided a nationwide firewall banning access to thousands of "subversive" websites. In addition, there are currently 30,000 cyberpolice operating all over the country and 62 cyberdissidents in jail for "inciting subversion."[31]

Despite the seeming effectiveness of state control of the Internet in China, Chinese netizens have developed skills to circumvent the control. As I talked to a donkey friend, he

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[30] Information provided on the CNNIC website, URL: http://www.cnnic.gov.

[31] Data and information provided by the Chinese Internet Research Yahoo Group:

http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/chineseinternetresearch/.

assured me that he could get access to any websites banned by the state through the anti-Golden Shield software. When netizens participate in Internet discussions, they know very well which words are sensitive and which words will deter the postings from being published. Likewise, they develop various tricks to get around the automatic filter system such as using pinyin or replacing sensitive words with wildcard characters. Tricks like spelling corruption (*fubai*) with FB and profiteer (*jianshang*) with JS also work effectively in most Chinese websites.

Due to the fact that you can play the game well if you know the rules, the Internet has provided a seedbed for discussions of various issues, be it social critics or apolitical gossips. Like the café and salon in eighteenth century Europe, the content of discussions taking place on the Internet, though apolitical most of the time, have provided the "training ground for critical reflection" and facilitated "a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness" (Habermas 1989: 29). While China still lacks an actual legal system protecting the right of free association, individuals are able to make use of the Internet forums to form virtual clubs, to socialize and mobilize collective actions. The Internet has become an indispensible part of xiaozi lifestyle. It gives them the fastest and most effective way to find like-minded people, associate themselves with a group, articulate their opinions and engage in a wide range of social activities. Since the late 1990s, increasing numbers of voluntary groups facilitated by the Internet have evolved in China's urban areas, including fan clubs, film discussion groups, photography clubs as well as donkey friend communities.

6.3.4   Order of New Chinese Urban Public Sphere

The development of a Chinese urban public sphere has taken place within the last decade along with the emergence of new subjectivities, associational spaces and technological advances. The

emergence of the idiosyncratic social group of xiaozi who are increasingly disintegrated from the state enterprises, and eager to share their opinions and socialize with like-minded people, together with the prevalence of the Internet, have jointly laid the foundation for the order of this new public sphere.

According to Yang (1994a), the public sphere in China urban took the form of minjian predicated and operated on guanxi practices. Minjian was not an independent force outside the state agencies but served as "a transitional space between the state and a fully developed self-organizing social formation" (289). As Yang rightly points out, guanxi practices were inextricably working within the regulated space of state apparatus, therefore it was hard to form free associations of guanxi subjects. In addition, guanxi networks were flexible, situational and shifting, they could not provide an effective social space for critical reflection and discussions without interference and supervision of the state. By contrast, the emergence of new class groups and technological advances that took place during the last decade have made it necessary and possible to form free and voluntary associations of individual citizens. The new associational space exhibits the following characteristics that were lacking in Yang's minjian sphere: (1) these associations are not part of or subordinated to the state bureaucracy, (2) they foster horizontal linkages of citizens across geographic and institutional boundaries independent of the state, (3) they operate according to non-state principles such as the AA system and non-instrumental principles, (4) they hold public assemblies and discussions, (5) their members are drawn from the new xiaozi middle class – the backbone of state's development and modernization, (6) unlike guanxi subjects, with their relative economic independence from state provisions and their emphasis on cultural capital, xiaozi middle class form a group of relatively free thinkers and independent critics, (7) unlike guanxi relationship embedded in renqing principles, members of

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voluntary groups practice equalitarian principles and democratic values such as voluntary participation, selection of web moderators and reasoned debate, (8) these grassroots organizations sometimes take up the role of NGO in order to mobilize collective action and promote public consciousness – their roles and concerns do not extend only to traveling or photography, but to the overall welfare of the society.

The rest of this chapter will examine the case of a charity sale by donkey friends in the Travel and Photograph Club, and demonstrate how a donkey friend community can become a "grassroots NGO," as donkey friends call it, and hence a significant force facilitating the development of the new public sphere in urban China. I want to point out four features of this charity sale as a collective action. The success of this activity benefits from the involvement of (1) grassroots organization, (2) xiaozi middle class individuals, (3) horizontal ties of donkey friends, and (4) a repertoire of collective action, such as public forums, photo exhibits, and Internet communications. In this case study, it can be seen that not only a new urban public sphere has come into being, but also it contains the particular potential to facilitate collective action and affect public consciousness.

6.4   THE CHARITY SALE AND GRASSROOTS NGOS

When River Fish talked about the history of the Club that afternoon, he referred the Club as a "grassroots NGO" (*caogen NGO*). He told me that he gained the inspiration from Wikipedia, a multilingual, web-based, free content encyclopedia project, operated as a non-profit organization. Wikipedia's articles are written collaboratively by volunteers around the world and the vast majority of its articles can be edited by anyone with access to the Internet. According to River

Fish, Wikipedia is a typical grassroots NGO that promotes no-threshold (*wu menkan*) collaboration and interaction of free individuals who can act on their own initiatives and working goals. He believed that the Club could become such a NGO that incorporates charity with travel, "since travel opened our eyes to the real world. Everyday we learned about China through the official channels like school and CCTV (China's Central Television), but when we traveled to the remote and poverty-stricken areas, we often saw the other side of the story. We saw the disadvantaged people dying out of starvation, rural children dropping out of school, and day-by-day desertification of grasslands as a result of silly policies."

During my year of field research, I witnessed several endeavors that combine the roles of NGO and travel club such as teaching in migrant worker's (*mingong*) communities, visiting rural schools, raising funds for the sick, and so on. Here, I will look at the case of a charity sale for petitioners (*fangmin*), people who were wronged or mistreated by the local government and came to Beijing to appeal to the higher authorities. I will use participant observation, interviews with volunteers, and the articles they wrote on the website to present the story and give voice to the donkey friends who participated in the activity.

In December 2005, I saw the first notice posted by a Club member "Ant" about the charity sale for petitioners and the group's plan to visit the "village of petitioners." Most of these petitioners spent the night outside, even in the winter, because they had no money to pay for hotel rooms. As a result, "villages of petitioners" emerged in Beijing's outskirts. These villages sometimes assembled hundreds of petitioners, and they were considered a real threat and social stigma by the local authority. In the winter, rumors had it that there were people dying from starvation or from the cold weather every night.

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Petitioners and their villages were invisible in the official Chinese media sources. Many donkey friends admitted that they first heard about these people when they read Ant's post. Ant wrote:

The winter has come, they need coats. Their name is fangmin (petitioner), who are not welcome in Beijing, but they are our sisters and brothers. While you are sitting comfortably in your heated office, enjoying your warm coffee, dreaming about skiing in the snowy mountains, think about these people, who are dying in the freezing wind. They need our help. You can donate clothes, quilts and sleeping bags. We will soon organize a charity sale with the aid of XX outdoor shop. The profits from the sale will be all used to buy coats and quilts for fangmin. If you want to know more about shangfang (petition) policy, you can Google through proxy because normally these words are filtered in Chinese websites.

Many donkey friends responded:

"Strongly support! They might be the poorest people in the world. I will donate my sleeping bag."

"I once caught sight of these people on my way home. Most of them were in rags. I saw them dragged away by the police. What can I do for them? Just let me know!"

"I can call upon my students to donate too. It's such a good educational opportunity."

"I live outside Beijing. Can I send clothes by mail?"

...

This post received 1176 hits and responses by 23 donkey friends.

In the following days, Ant posted each day to report on the items donated and the preparation for the sale. During that time, the Club organized a visit to the village in order to, on

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the one hand, understand the real needs of the petitioners, and on the other hand, to let donkey friends see the living conditions of petitioners with their own eyes. Eleven people showed up for the visit, including Ant, River Fish, Dan and myself. It was a warm winter day, sunny and the wind was mild. I met the group at a parking lot a few blocks from the village, where they had already parked their cars and brought out two packages of donated items. Besides the people I already knew, I saw a couple of new faces; two females and three males, they looked as though they were in their early thirties, appropriately dressed in their warmest winter coat. We first had lunch at a nearby restaurant, during which time we exchanged our web IDs and introduced ourselves. I got to know that the guy who wore the black leather coat was a photographer, the woman holding his hand was his wife and a freelance writer, the other woman was a teacher, and the other two men both worked in the IT industry. We discussed the best way to give away the items we had brought without creating chaos. After our brainstorming, we decided first to locate the people who needed the coats most, and then to give them each an identification-card so that they could come and receive the coat individually. It proved to be an effective method. When we met again in the early afternoon, we had already given out all the relief items, besides; we took some fifty photos of the scene and people in the village. The petitioners were all eager to have their pictures taken and asked us to publish their photos on the Internet. They told us that foreign journalists came to take their pictures too and that they hoped that one day the leaders of the country would see their pictures and really acknowledge their existence. We, wittingly or unwittingly, acted as the bridge for these petitioners to reach the outside world.

Returning from the trip, we published the photos on the Internet. It was right before the sale. Perhaps in response to the photos, over one hundred people showed up at the site of the charity sale. In collaboration with an outdoor equipment store, the Club had bought a large

quantity of outdoor equipment, clothing and boots at very low prices. That night, donkey friends came to the café from different locations, some drove two hours, and some brought the whole family. The café was filled with people. Mountain shoes were scattered on the shelves, pants were hanging on the walls, and clothes were still lying in boxes. The sale was so crowded that I had to reach over someone's shoulder to grab a pair of shoes and to pay the cashier. Everyone was shouting; I could hardly distinguish if they were asking about prices of items or chatting with friends. At the end of the night, the sale had raised 13,480 Yuan ($2000) from sales and direct donations of another 5,000 Yuan ($620). The next day, Ant wrote in his blog:

> It was already half past ten when I left the café, and it was 1 a.m. when I arrived home. A large number of donkey friends came tonight. The café was crowded and noisy. I used to be shy in public, but this time I talked so much that I almost lost my voice. The results of the sale were beyond my expectations. Except for a few shoes and three pairs of pants, everything was sold out. With the money we received, we can buy more than 100 sets of winter coats and hats, and even some quilts. We will give them away this Saturday, and hope to help to relieve some petitioners' misery.

Figure 7 A Scene at the Charity Sale

By the time the winter of 2005 had passed, the Club had brought tons of relief materials to the village of petitioners, either donated by donkey friends or bought with the money earned from the charity sale. Ant was satisfied with the results. As he told me, "of course, our purpose was not to abolish the petition system. We were not that naïve. Our goal was simple: to help petitioners survive the winter. It is in this sense this activity was successful." Like the charity sale, the Club also organized volunteer projects to tutor children who had dropped out of school, and to visit rural schools. All these projects shared the same vision expressed by Ant. The goal of these activities was not to directly oppose or challenge state authority, or to promote political change, but to solve concrete social problems, raise public consciousness and promote cultural change. They did not target the state. Their targets included social practices, individual behavior, and citizen consciousness. Because the central government follows national policies of sustainable development, compulsory education, and harmonious society, the volunteer projects

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of grassroots groups like actual NGOs in neoliberal times help fulfill the goals that the government fails to realize singlehandedly.

The rise of these voluntary associations and grassroots actions signify the new rationality of urban governance in a neoliberal era, which, however, is beyond the scope of this study. I will focus on these self-identified "grassroots NGOs" and their volunteer projects in this study. In order to provide concrete help to the people who need special care: the poor, the sick, school drop offs and laid off workers, these groups comply with government policies, and sometimes even seek support from government agencies, such as the news media, to achieve their goals. More than once Beijing's newspaper and television have reported on the volunteer projects of donkey friends, including environmental protection campaigns, photo exhibits, and volunteer programs in rural schools. Although they are not recognized as an official entity, the term "grassroots NGO" has been often employed in these news reports.

To conclude, travel and charity, travel clubs and NGOs, are seemingly irrelevant concepts. But today in China, increasing numbers of young people give money to the poor or help rural children and rural schools through voluntarily formed grassroots travel clubs. This new social phenomenon demonstrates several notable features. The first is the grassroots organization of these groups. They are not registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs so that they are less subject to state regulation and supervision. They are economically independent of the state too, as their operation is either free of cost or self-sufficient. Second, xiaozi middle class played an important role in raising public discussion, disseminating knowledge, and mobilizing collective action. The emergence of this group of a more mobile, heterogeneous and economically independent urban population has increasingly called for new types of interpersonal relationships and social networks. Their emphasis on cultural capital has stimulated them to seek horizontal

ties and alliances with like-minded people. They express the urgent desire to articulate their newly found identity and to share their private experiences. Therefore, the emergence of new horizontal ties of urban citizens, accompanied by the rise of new types of interactions and communications on the Internet, has become part of a repertoire of collective actions described above. The grassroots collective practices have not only cultivated the consciousness of individual rights and expanded the realm of individual subjectivity, but also provided the training ground for personal critical reflection and public debate, which are critical for the formation and development of China's urban public sphere.

The Travel and Photography Club aside, LEAD and 1KG are two other grassroots clubs formed among donkey friends. LEAD, an abbreviation for "Letting Education Achieve Dreams," is a community engaged in helping children to achieve their dreams through education. 1KG is formed by a group of donkey friends to encourage travelers to carry one kilo of school supplies for children living in poor areas. These grassroots organizations all take on certain functions of a NGO and combine travel and charity in one way or another. Through these activities, the members not only practice democratic values but also give meaning to their travel as well as their everyday lives. Therefore, the "grassroots NGOs" of donkey friends constitute the social fabric of the transformed urban life and give rise to the new Chinese urban public sphere, in which urban citizens are empowered to govern themselves, articulate private opinions, and form public opinions through equal discussion and reasoned debate. At the same time, their collective actions help fulfill the pressing welfare functions that the state has been unable to achieve in the course of the rapid transformations of contemporary urban Chinese society.

7.0   CONCLUSION: TRAVEL, VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS AND THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERE IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN CHINA

This dissertation research began with my initial interest in a group of Chinese urban youth who identified themselves as donkey friends. The transformation of the Chinese urban landscape has given rise to the formation of new citizen subjectivities, new types of social organizations and interpersonal relationships. The radical changes that took place in urban China in the last decade included the boom of a consumer culture, the flourish of the Internet, and rise of various social groups. It is against this socioeconomic background that Chinese backpackers, who are self-identified as donkey friends, have become a popular cultural identity among urban youth. This dissertation entitled, "Donkey Friends: Travel, Voluntary Associations and the New Public Sphere in Contemporary Urban China" has demonstrated that the cultural identity of donkey friend represents new citizen subjectivities, that donkey friend tourism is part of a new lifestyle, and that donkey friend communities are a new kind of social network. Through voluntary participation, mutual support and collective actions, donkey friends form a grassroots associational space that constitutes a new urban public sphere in which individual and collective endeavors are made to practice democratic values, raise public consciousness and promote cultural change. However, this does not mean that these grassroots organizations target the state and challenge state authority. Unlike the democratic salon and activist groups of the 1980s, the new civic associations try to ally with the state to achieve their goals. They often find resonance

in national policies toward providing concrete help and maintain a harmonious society so that sometimes they even seek support from the government to aid their volunteer projects. Therefore, to some extent, grassroots organizations help the government to pacify the discontent of disadvantaged groups by fulfilling certain social functions that the central government fails to realize.

7.1   REVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 discussed the research methodology of my fieldwork in conventional communities and in virtual communities. Rising from liminal spaces of road and Internet, I argued that virtual ethnography is necessary to fully understand the origins, personal motivations and interpersonal interactions of donkey friends. In fact, Internet forums were the gateway through which I gained entry into the three donkey friend communities I ended up studying. In chapter 2, I described how I located these communities, joined their activities and became recognized by fellow donkey friends. From this firsthand experience, I recognized that there was no way to become a donkey friend if I had not become a "netizen" first. To be a donkey friend means to know the behaviors, conventions, linguistic codes as well certain "strategies" to accumulate an online reputation. The three donkey friend communities in which I conducted my fieldwork, Lvye (Green Wilderness) Outdoor Club, Cherokee Team, and the Travel and Photography Club, all had a stable membership and operated as grassroots associations of travelers facilitated by independent websites or forums. Reflecting upon my field experience within these communities, I have challenged the dichotomies of real / virtual and online / offline. I observed that online status and offline encounters often influence each other. Offline encounters may increase one's popularity

and reputation and at the same time online participation augments the chances that one is accepted to go on a trip. It is in the sense that a traveler's online identity and relationship with others are carried smoothly into everyday life interactions. Therefore, both online socialization and offline encounters serve to create a strong sense of solidarity and a "community of sentiment" (Appadurai 1996).

In chapter 3, I looked at the "art" of donkey friend guanxi relationships. In contrast to the conventional guanxi networks that evolved from "familiar people" – family and kinship, neighborhood and native-place ties – donkey friend relationships largely sprang from the liminal spaces of the Internet and travel spaces, among the like-minded people who do not share consanguineal relations, native-place ties or common working experiences. In one sense, they are strangers. I argued that the renqing principle is no longer a dominant force in the networks of "strangers," rather principles of egalitarianism, non-instrumentalism, and self-dedication have become the major themes guiding the interpersonal interactions of donkey friends. In discussing the ethical, (non)instrumental and aesthetic aspects of social relationships formed among donkey friends, I observed that donkey friends often expressed their unconditional trust towards one another in both online and face-to-face contexts, and they perceived their relationships based on mutual help and trust as pure and authentic, in contrast to the instrumentalism often implied in traditional guanxi networks.

In all three donkey friend communities in which I conducted fieldwork, many people brought up the topics of kindness, trust, and compassion in their everyday conversations and in their responses to my interview questions. For them, voluntary communities not only provided expansive encounters between people and with nature, but also allowed them to be engaged in various collaborations corresponding to their humanistic concerns for people and nature. The

desire for a harmonious world has further informed donkey friends to act together on a variety of projects such as those I discussed in Chapter 6. These collaborative activities gave them the sense of belonging and gave rise to their collective identity as "donkey friends", which was discussed and analyzed in Chapter 4.

In Chapter 4, I considered the relationship between travel, narrative and identity. As travel, backpacker travel in particular, has been increasingly recognized as a metaphor for mobility, and as representative of a lifestyle and an expression of a cultural identity. Donkey friend tourism indicates the emergence of new class markers and new urban identities in contemporary China. Studying the stories that donkey friends told about themselves demonstrated that travelers' articulation of a trip, accompanied by personal reflections and critiques, serve to constitute a unique narrative of self-identity. Through the narratives of authenticity, hardship tourism and self-improvement, donkey friends were able to raise critiques of a number of aspects of a consumer culture in China urban today, such as the commodification of human relationships, luxurious consumption and unhealthy life styles. By writing their travel stories, donkey friends come to define and maintain their social distinctions, accumulate social and cultural capital, and make sense of who they are.

In Chapter 5, I drew upon life stories of three female donkey friends, and studied the ways in which they asserted their femininity and agency in a masculine outdoor world. The heroines in Chapter 5 used travel and writing to portray their world and to negotiate a femininity that is not weak, sensual and submissive, characteristics that are commonly represented under the male gaze in China's newly emerged urban consumer culture. Female travelers displayed no less courage, bravery and perseverance on the road, and simultaneously maintained their femininity by admitting their physical limitations and emotional vulnerability, letting their male companions

take care of heavy and dirty work, and volunteering taking care of domestic chores during their travels.

I have argued that "donkey friend" has emerged as a new social identity for both men and women on the road, and that it has given rise to new types of social relationships and networks. In Chapter 6, I embarked on the project of searching for the new public sphere within donkey friend communities. I contrasted my discovery with Mayfair Yang's minjian to indicate an independent, self-regulated and voluntary public sphere has come into being in urban China. Based on fieldwork conducted more than twenty years ago, Yang's study was constrained by the particular sociopolitical context in the 1980s when free mobility and free association of individuals were indeed difficult, and even unthinkable. This led to her conclusion that a Chinese urban public sphere might not be predicated on individual subjectivities and independent associations or groups, but would "most likely be fueled by a discourse of relatedness and obligations" embedded in the art of guanxi. Granted, guanxi practices and gift exchange allowed Chinese individuals to manipulate and redistribute the resources and goods distributed by the state, and to circumvent the disciplining techniques of the state in socialist China. However, the impact and significance of guanxixue and renqing principles have since then been steadily undermined by the spread of a market economy and the expansion of a number of reforms in the field of industry, the welfare system, education and family planning in the late 1990s. These reforms have effected a profound transformation of the structure and function of urban social networks.

In contrast to Yang's work, my research drew upon the voluntary associations of donkey friends in order to demonstrate that the structural transformation of the urban landscape took place within the last decade along with the emergence of new collective identities and new

technological advances. With the diffusion of the Internet and emergence of xiaozi middle class in the cities, urban individuals have been released from traditional guanxi networks and expressed evermore eagerness to meet people like themselves and form horizontal ties and independent fellowships. Moreover, many of the members of these groups refer to their associations as "grassroots NGOs." These "NGOs" manifest the potential to mobilize collective action including fundraising, teaching school drop outs in the rural areas, helping the petitioners in the suburbs, and holding forums that serve as occasions for social criticism. Most importantly, I argue that the donkey friend associations and other self-organized communities based on common interests and values, despite their seemingly apolitical nature, constitute the social fabric of the new urban Chinese public sphere, and demonstrate the democratic potential to stimulate critical debate, form public opinions, and mobilize collective actions in the name of their commonalities as well as in the name of individual rights.

7.2   REFLECTIONS

In the second half of 2006, I spent most of my time transcribing interviews and reading notes from my fieldwork trips. I often found my mind carried back to the fieldwork days. I thought about my donkey friends, the moments they shared with me, drinking locally brewed liquors and singing revolutionary songs in the Mongolian grasslands, climbing peaks and trekking slopes on the plateaus of Yunnan and Tibet, picking up "white garbage" [32] throughout the suburbs of

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[32] Non-degradable plastics, usually while polystyrene (PS) foam food containers and other disposable plastic products.

Beijing. Memories resurfaced, allowing me to relive our passionate debates about the future of the country while sharing a meal at hotpot tables, brainstorming sessions on preventing grassland desertification, sighing lamentations over hapless petitioners, and gasping in alarm at the lastest child drop-out rates. There were times of happiness when mutual understanding was reached, of gratitude when unexpected help was received, and heart-break when friendship was betrayed.

I found myself reflecting on Paul Rabinow's words, that it is through fieldwork that we approach a "comprehension of self by the detour of the comprehension of the other" (1977: 5). I asked myself: what new understanding have I gained of self and life after my fieldwork? I pondered that, on many levels, fieldwork contains elements that resemble a kind of love story sequence: the initial attraction to a group of people or a lifestyle, the ensuing time and effort spent on project design for the purpose of getting close and getting to know their lifeways, and the need to raise funds and to juggle schedules so as to be able to get on with the work properly. Once "in," one plunges into a whole set of experiences: joys both expected and unexpected, satisfactions at getting it right, aspirations for deeper and faster progress, and, not the least of all, the inevitable times of sadness and anxiety. And yet, after hardships have been endured, misunderstanding cleared, and things finally seem on track, a time of separation comes to say good-bye. Now my time has come for sitting back, for reflecting on what it all means. There are definitely lessons, but the experience has already left imprints on life and will enrich it, in ways that are still to be realized.

My fieldwork has allowed me to gain new insights into the "familiar." As a native Chinese, I did not experience the intense cultural shock and anxiety that an anthropologist might experience when entering a field of strangers and the "unfamiliar." Conducting fieldwork in a place where I grew up meant a familiar linguistic environment, conventional networks of family

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and friends, and established ways of living and socializing. The seeming expediency and convenience in actuality presented a serious challenge to the fieldwork: how could I raise questions about a living situation with which I was so familiar and even took for granted? The answer was that I needed to distantiate and de-familiarize myself from the familiar environment and people, to look, listen, and feel with curiosity, to think reflexively, and to experiment with ideas. The training in the United States helped me take an outsider's perspective, and my overseas living experience provided me a significant point of departure from which to carry out a comparative and contextualized study of Chinese backpacker tourism.

If Paul Rabinow achieved the comprehension of himself through his fieldwork in Morocco, I, a native Chinese fieldworker, would better summarize my fieldwork as a process of "making the familiar unfamiliar in order to reach a new understanding of self and the other." Throughout the course of the fieldwork and dissertation writing, I constantly negotiated my multiple roles as a researcher, a traveler, a friend, consultant and confidant. The tension I often felt with my multiple roles and subject positions demonstrates that fieldwork is not a once and for all experience bounded in time and space, but rather, it is a continuous and growing project where friendship is built and maintained, new discoveries can be made, and new understandings can be formed. It is in this sense that I conclude this chapter by revisiting the three donkey friend communities and registering the new trends that took place after I left the field. These follow-up stories will complement my dissertation by highlighting the diversity and heterogeneity of donkey friends, who always form new alliances, come up with new concerns, and embark on new projects.

7.3   DONKEY FRIENDS REVISITED

In late April 2006, just before I was about to finish my fieldwork, a friend of mine from the Cherokee Team called, asking me if I would like to join her on a road trip to Lhasa. She and a few donkey friends were planning a "self-driving tour" all the way from Beijing to Lhasa during the National Labor Day week. Of course, they were not going alone: a dozen car loads of people had signed on with the tour, voluntarily organized by a senior Cherokee team member.

In 2006, Tibet had once again become the hottest destination for donkey friends. Within one month, the Cherokee Team organized no less than ten "self-driving tours" to Lhasa, and on Lvye and other travel websites, there were donkey friends seeking travel companions to Tibet every day. Such restlessness was mainly caused by the news that on July 1, China would officially open the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, the highest rail line in the world. The opening of the Railway meant that hardship travel to Tibet had become a thing of the past. Through its 48-hour, 2,500-mile maiden run, the Beijing-Lhasa express could provide, theoretically, everyone from Beijing, Shanghai, and other major Chinese cities direct rail access to Lhasa. The line boasted high-tech engineering to stabilize tracks over permafrost, train carriages with windows with ultra-violet filters to keep out the sun's glare, and oxygen pumped into cabins to help passengers cope with the high altitude.

Donkey friends consciously rejected taking the Qinghai –Tibet train. With the opening of the railway, Tibet would no longer be a dreamland that could only be reached after years of dreaming and planning, months of studying travelogues and road books (*lushu*), and days and nights of exhausting travel. Traveling to Tibet would then lose its weight as a source of cultural and symbolic capital for donkey friends. More importantly, as one donkey friend told me right before the railway was opened, they would lose the sense of connection and comradeship with

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those who had been to Tibet. To many of them, the opening of the railway signified the loss of another territory to the development of mass tourism. Despite the public lament over the loss of their "sacred" land and concerns about environmental damage and irreversible change of Tibetan culture and lifestyles, the railway was inaugurated on July 1, 2006, with the promise that the railway would eventually help Tibet achieve the economic prosperity.

During the Labor Day holidays of 2006, in addition to the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, an accident in the desert received widespread attention. A 28-year-old female donkey friend, joining a hiking team to the desert, had an accident and did not survive the harsh environment despite the continuous rescue attempts by her teammates. Outdoor safety thus became one of the hottest topics on the Internet, probably ranking only behind Tibet tourism within donkey friend communities. The accident brought dozens of Lvye volunteers to organize a series of public seminars on outdoor safety and survival skills. In the second half of 2006, Lvye members mobilized twenty or so travelers and founded the first self-organized grassroots Rescue Union.

While The Cherokee Team members were busying organizing driving trips to Tibet and Lvye people established the Rescue Union, the Travel and Photography Club was facing the possibility of disbanding. Despite a large membership of more than two thousand members, the owners of the Club could not survive on the meager income earned from the café and organizing seminars and donkey friend trips. River Fish and Dan, two owners of the club, admitted that they were not very good at business. At the end of June 2006, River Fish decided to close the café and opened a new one in Haidian district. But that one did not last long either. The club was never officially closed. Despite the closing of the café, club members still organized tours among themselves and socialized with one another by visiting the Internet forum, chatting through

instant messenger, and browsing one another's blogs. By the time I got back to the United States, River Fish had found a job as the chief editor for a widely circulated travel magazine, and Dan went as a volunteer to teach at a Tibetan school in Yunnan Province. In her Blog, Dan recorded her teaching experiences. She taught her students about "love." As she wrote,

> This morning I asked my students, "Do you know why I came here?"
>
> "You came to teach us."
>
> "But before I came here, did I know you and did you know me?"
>
> "No."
>
> "Then why did I come here?"
>
> "Don't know."
>
> "Because of love, because I have 'love' in my heart," I pointed to my heart and taught them to make a gesture of "I love you"… I really hope that to love can become a kind of habit; a form of power, accompanying me and children to walk through the rest of the days in our lives.

The year of 2006 was definitely not the peak of donkey friend tourism, but it has seen a steady increase in the number of people traveling as donkey friends and the development of a corresponding industry in the form of chains of outdoor-gear stores, alternative guidebooks, Youth Hostels, coffee houses and Internet cafés targeting donkey friend customers. Travel and outdoor enthusiasts who are often glossed under the unified term "donkey friend" have become ever more diversified and heterogeneous. As a matter of fact, "donkey friend" has never been a unified and fixed identity as it has been constantly negotiated with and contested by such social categories as gender, class, and residence. In Chapter 4 I examined how the urban young travelers constructed the identity of "donkey friend" as a marker of distinction, and in Chapter 5

I studied how women travelers appropriated the term to rearticulate and regain their femininity. The new stories I collected as I revisited the Cherokee Team, Lvye and Travel and Photography Club bear out this complexity and diversity within the world of donkey friends. Lvye volunteers were engaged in establishing a grassroots Rescue Union to save lives, while the drivers in the Cherokee Team were busy heading to Tibet before it was occupied by the guided tourists on the express train. One of the owners of the Travel and Photography Club, Dan, traveled to a remote Yunnan village to carry on the Club tradition of combining travel with charity. Under the umbrella of donkey friend, people do not extend their imagination and practices only to travel activities; they continue to pursue their dreams and life goals in a numbers of distinct and diverse ways.

This study of donkey friend tourism and their communities in post-socialist China is significant not only because it offers an ethnographically-based study of travel, social relations, and social change but because it contributes to the anthropology of China by providing a detailed analysis of varied touristic engagements and formation of voluntary associations through which the state monopoly on production and consumption is increasingly challenged by new forms of social autonomy, increased mobility, and interpersonal relationships. Drawing upon my fieldwork in three donkey friend communities in China, I examined the emergence and development of new types of interpersonal relationships, new identities and subjectivities, and a new urban public sphere driven by voluntary participation, democratic practices and collective actions. This project has answered some questions and has raised new ones. In my future research, I hope to build on this project by asking how globalization impacts grassroots organizations in China. In particular, a new arena of research will be to focus on environmental NGOs in China that are built on local initiatives but respond to the opportunities that are

advanced by international NGOs. Such research will build on my dissertation research on China's new voluntary organizations, but will allow me to further explore the culturally specific meanings of environmental activism, global cooperation, and grassroots resistance.

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