Preface

The year 2005 was a turning point in the history of Internet bulletin boards in China. Popularly known as BBS, Internet bulletin boards first appeared in China in 1995. The first and most famous was SMTH in Tsinghua University.

In 2005, however, a dynamic and relatively open university BBS culture entered what was then called "the winter of university BBS." Forcibly turned into a closed system through a nationwide crackdown, it quickly withered. What happened to SMTH that year was of symbolic significance. On March 16, 2005, the Network Research Center of Tsinghua University implemented a physical router-block to stop 200,000 users outside of the campus from accessing SMTH. Two days later, three university officials obtained the right as SMTH's system operators and attempted, unsuccessfully, to obtain the personal information of all the board managers. Finally, in the early morning of April 14, university staff members broke into the room that housed the SMTH server, removed the cables connecting the data hard drive, and then reconnected the hard drive to another server. In this way, SMTH was forcibly taken over by the university administration.

Users and fans put up a great deal of resistance both online and offline. In the SMTH BBS, users initially expressed their views with great emotional outrage. When they lost hope, they started to destroy the "virtual homeland" they had inhabited for the last 10 years by deleting their own IDs and posts. They also expressed their anger and mobilized the public through other online forums, websites, and blogs. Meanwhile, offline action was taken. Some gathered on the campus and held negotiations with the president of the university. Others published their views in the mass media. In the end, most SMTH users migrated to a newly built NewSMTH housed in a server outside of Tsinghua University.

This is one of the many stories of regulation and resistance retold in Dr. Wei He's remarkable book on the networked public in China. It is an unfortunate, but telling story. In the relatively short history of the Internet in China, many other websites suffered a similar fate. Many other passionate Internet users experienced similar frustrations. These websites and their users left their imprints on a

burgeoning Internet culture and online sphere, but when the websites were closed or forced to migrate to other servers, their stories tend to be forgotten. Serious archaeological efforts are needed to rediscover and retrieve these stories.

The fine details of the story of SMTH constructed by Dr. He go a long way toward such retrieval. But this book is more than just about these stories. It also offers a sweeping account of networked public communication in China and how these new forms of communication are both embedded in China's changing social contexts and constitutive of new forms of publics.

Dr. He is one of the most accomplished of the younger generation of communication scholars in China. These young scholars are well informed about communication scholarship in the English language, but have published mainly in their native Chinese language for a Chinese-reading audience. Theory-conscious and yet grounded in intimate and firsthand knowledge of digital media in their native country, they have gained a strong intellectual voice there. Like his peers, Dr. He is not only a serious scholar, but is also passionately engaged in public debates through social and public media.

In the flourishing field of Internet and digital media studies outside of China, however, the voices of communication scholars from inside China are still weak. What are their perspectives on such important matters as regulation, censorship, participation, and online networking? How do they respond to theories from different standpoints? Indeed, how do they position themselves vis-à-vis their subject matter and within the ever-changing mediascape in China and the world?

English readers will find some answers, directly or indirectly, to these and many other questions in this book. Readers will also discover new ways of thinking about familiar questions. Dr. He deserves hearty congratulations for undertaking this English translation of his well-received Chinese monograph. His book deserves to be read widely.

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