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## **"Talking to Strangers Online in China"**

### Abstract

A new form of sociality is developing among Chinese youth: the Elastic Self. Changes in social media's capacity to mediate information and interaction is creating new spaces for youth to shift the norms and behaviors of social relations in China in three ways: from self-restraint to self-expression, from comradeship to friendship, and from a "moral me" to a "moral we". These changes have potentially transformative power for Chinese society as a whole because they are altering the way that people perceive and engage with each other on a personal and social level. Under conditions of semi-anonymity, Chinese youth are able to bypass the low forms of trust that characterize authoritarian societies to broader forms of social trust that characterize more participatory societies. These new forms of trust enable them to engage in citizenship practices that expand the public sphere through online debates that, on occasion, connect to offline civic participation. Before they can do this, however, youth must pass through two critical dimensions—Exploratory and Trusting—where they learn how to share information and socialize in a low-risk context with strangers. Interactions with strangers provide Chinese youth with social distance from people they know, thereby minimizing the anxiety of being shamed for acting inappropriately.

While the West often characterizes China as a repressive surveillance state, my research reveals that Chinese youth are finding ways to connect each other and establish a web of casual trust that extends beyond particularistic guanxi ties and authoritarian institutions. For the most part, youth are discovering their social world, not a social cause. In doing so, youth are building the infrastructure of a civil society by establishing friendships with one another through relationships that start out between strangers. To be clear, this new form of sociality gives youth a way to navigate Chinese society, not disconnect from it or rebel against it. This new sociality is building the groundwork for a public sphere to emerge out of social ties based on friendship, then citizenship.