Coping with Separation

Chinese Seafarer-Partners in Cyberspace

Lijun Tang

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Abstract

This thesis examines a group of Chinese seafarer-partners' participation in a discussion website called *Home of Chinese Seafarers*. Specifically, it investigates the ways and extent to which participation in the site serves to ameliorate problems associated with separation and loneliness for seafarers-partners caused by the seafarers work patterns.

The study utilised qualitative research methods. Online participant observation was conducted for a period in excess of two years and face to face and email interviews were carried out with seafarer-partner participants and the website managers. Web-based content from the site was also recorded and analysed. In analysing the data three central themes were developed: forms of participation, the production of friendship and the potential effect of participation upon the self.

The findings suggest that participation in this particular website enables seafarer-partners to pool their available resources to provide each other with informational help, emotional support, and differing degrees of friendship. With these resources it appears that they are better equipped to combat the loneliness and isolation experienced as a result of their partners repeated prolonged absences. Their participation in the site also helps them to make sense of and validate their experiences and to gain a sense of security and certainty. As a result, seafarer-partners become more positive towards their lives and future, and make claims for improved well-being.

The analysis of the data further reveals that seafarer-partners produce and reproduce a set of group norms and values within the website which promote understanding, supportive and self-sacrificing seafarers' wives/partners. This raises the issue of whether participating in the website is repressive or can be regarded as empowering.

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Glossary[1]

BBS -- (Bulletin Board System)

A computerised meeting and announcement system that allows people to carry on discussions, upload and download files, and make announcements without the people being connected to the computer at the same time. In the early 1990's there were many thousands (millions?) of BBSs around the world, most are very small, running on a single IBM clone PC with 1 or 2 phone lines. Some are very large and the line between a BBS and a system like AOL gets crossed at some point, but it is not clearly drawn.

IP Number -- (Internet Protocol Number)

Sometimes called a dotted quad. A unique number consisting of 4 parts separated by dots, e.g.

165.113.245.2

Every machine that is on the Internet has a unique IP number - if a machine does not have an IP number, it is not really on the Internet. Many machines (especially servers) also have one or more Domain Names that are easier for people to remember.

MUD -- (Multi-User Dungeon or Dimension)

A (usually text-based) multi-user simulation environment. Some are purely for fun and flirting, others are used for serious software development, or education purposes and all that lies in between. A significant feature of most MUDs is that users can create things that stay after they leave and which other users can interact within their absence, thus allowing a world to be built gradually and collectively.

Newsgroup

The name for discussion groups on *USENET*.

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[1] Adopted from http://www.matisse.net/files/glossary.html and http://en.wikipedia.org

QQ

The most popular free instant messaging computer program in China, and the world's third most popular IM service. The program is maintained by Tencent Holdings Limited, owned in part by Naspers. Since its entrance into Chinese households QQ quickly emerged as a modern cultural phenomenon, now being portrayed in popular culture. Aside from the chat program, QQ has also developed many subfeatures including games, pets, ringtone downloads, etc.

USENET

A world-wide system of discussion groups, with comments passed among hundreds of thousands of machines. Not all USENET machines are on the *Internet*. USENET is completely decentralised, with over 10,000 discussion areas, called *newsgroups*.

Introduction

This thesis explores a group of relatively young Chinese seafarer-partners[2]' (SPs) activities in a website called the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* (HCS) in general, and discusses how these SPs utilise this website to cope with separation caused by their boyfriends/husbands' seafaring careers in particular. Online participant observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to make sense of SPs' experiences in this online space. Drawing upon the gathered qualitative data the attention is first given to the development and operation of the website and the predicaments that these SPs are likely to face when their partners are at sea. Following that, the analytical focus turns to the main themes of this study – SPs' participation in the website and an examination of the way in which it impacts upon their lives. The discussion focuses on: the ways in which SPs participated in the HCS, the support and resources they obtained from participation, the relationships formed in the website, the process through which the norms and values were constructed, maintained and reinforced in this space, and the empowerment potential of Internet use.

The HCS is a Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) website established in 2003 by a Chinese seafarer. One stated aim of the website is to set up a platform for seafarers, SPs and others in the seafaring community to communicate with each other. I first came across the HCS website in April 2004 when searching for information about Chinese seafarers. The first time I entered the site, the discussion topic 'why is seafarers' social status so low?' appeared on the home page and drew my attention (maybe because I am an ex-seafarer). This particular posting came from a frustrated cadet whose friend told him that seafaring was a hopeless career and therefore he ought to change his job as soon as possible. I was interested in the confessional tone, the anger and the question. Though the site was initially designed for seafarers, I

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[2] In China, except a few women working on cruise vessels as stewardesses, the remaining seafarers are males. This study focuses on partners of the latter. Furthermore, this research only takes heterosexual seafaring couples into account. Therefore, seafarer-partners in this thesis refer to seafarers' wives and (unmarried) seafarers' girl-friends.

found that actually seafarer-partners (SPs) were the major contributors to this website. The forum *Communication between seafarers and seafarer-partners*, the majority participants of which were SPs, contained 20,307 postings, one-third of all 61,892 postings in the 60 forums of this website as of August 15th, 2005. This may not be surprising – although the website is titled for seafarers, the latter's involvement in it can only be periodic, since when at sea their access to the Internet is very limited, if possible. This study focused on the experience of SP participants.

SPs are a special group and are likely to endure long-term separation from their partners because of the nature of seafaring careers. So far, little research light has been shed on SPs (for a few exceptions see Foster and Cacioppe, 1986; Thomas, 2003; Thomas *et al.*, 2003).The seafaring family life in general is an under-researched area. In fact, seafarers as an occupational group have not received much attention as Thomas (2003) has pointed out and most of the conducted studies focused on safety issues rather than seafarers' family lives.

Because they are a special group, however, a study focusing on SPs may help us to gain new insights into the practise of 'doing' relationships. It has been suggested that in modern society, increasingly there is a 'quest for intimacy' (Beck and Beck-Gemsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). Nowadays, more and more people live in densely populated, big, and fast-moving cities and are surrounded by strangers. The urbanisation, in many commentators' view, is likely to produce fleeting and superficial relationships and isolated individuals. As a result, Beck and Beck-Gemsheim (1995: 33; see also Beck 1992: 114) argue, contemporary individuals long for an intimate relationship for emotional warmth and more significantly, to avoid loneliness:

> [I]t is less material security and affection than the fear of being alone which keeps families and marriages together. Perhaps the most reliable foundation for marriage, despite all the crisis and doubts, is the threat of what would face us without it – loneliness.

Meanwhile, according to some theorists, such as Bauman (2003), Beck and Beck-Gemsheim (1995), and Giddens (1992), the way of doing intimacy today tends to be self-centred: individuals maintain the bond only when it offers them enough satisfaction, and they have little intention to sacrifice self-development for the relation. As a result, modern intimate relationships and marriages have become vulnerable and

volatile. This grand picture, however, seems at odds with seafaring families in which long-term separation often causes loneliness and isolation for SPs (Thomas, 2003; Thomas and Bailey, 2006). In this context, a sketch of the small picture of SPs' experiences arguably would shed new light on the practice of doing and maintaining intimate relationships.

Against this backdrop, the HCS provides an appropriate setting for a study of SPs. It is a social space where SPs are able to 'meet' each other and share their concerns associated with absent partners. The social interactions in the site are largely done in the form of text which is retrievable. As such, the website offers a unique window through which we are able to see one part of their world. Following the guidelines of research ethics, a study of SPs' activities in this space can contribute to our understanding of their particular experiences.

Furthermore, it has been noted that the concept of the self has moved to the centre stage of social sciences and attracted attention from many sociologists (Callero, 2003). Among them, Giddens (1990; 1991) argues that the self has become 'a reflexive project' – instead of taking fixed traditions and customs as the guidance for actions, contemporary individuals actively search for information and reflexively (re)choose a lifestyle based on existing knowledge and incoming information in order to empower themselves. The Internet obviously facilitates information searching, which may help people to make informed decisions and become more reflexive. For this reason, the empowering capacity of the Internet use has been widely studied. In this context, a study of SPs' participation in an online space and the associated impacts would add to the understanding of the self on the one hand, and the empowerment potential of the Internet on the other.

These considerations motivated me to conduct this research and formulate the following research questions which helped to frame the study:

1. What is the origin of the website? How did it come to be established? How is the website managed? How is the website organised and developed?

2. What are the characteristics of the website's SP users? What predicaments do they face? What are their needs?

3. How do SPs participate in the HCS? Does their participation help them to alleviate their problems and meet their needs? If it does, how does it achieve this, and what processes and mechanisms are involved?

4. What are the perceived impacts of this website upon SP users? Does it liberate SPs, and if so, in what sense?

This doctoral thesis aims to make a contribution to sociology of intimate relationships, sociology of friendship, sociology of emotion, sociology of the self, sociology of Internet use, and sociology of social networks. It draws eclectically upon a range of theoretical work in order to highlights, illuminate and help make sense of the rich qualitative data generated.

Structure of Thesis

The first two chapters review relevant literature and provide a context for this study. The focus of chapter 1 is issues related to SPs. It first depicts a general and broad picture of seafaring families in China and the conditions of Chinese seafarers' wives' welfare. Following that, the focus moves to the major problem that SPs tend to endure during separation times – loneliness and isolation. Chapter 2 discusses three bodies of literature: romantic love and intimate relationships, friendships and Internet use and empowerment. These materials informed the collection and analysis of data for this research.

Chapter 3 provides a reflexive account of the research process. It describes my experiences of online participant observation and conducting interviews with thirty SPs and two managers. The challenges and difficulties met in the field are also discussed. At the end of this chapter, research ethics are considered.

A brief introduction of the HCS is presented in Chapter 4. This includes its history, its development, its management and regulations, and the macro environment in which the website is located. A discussion of authenticity of postings and the identity of SP participants in the website is provided at the end of Chapter 4. Chapter 5 describes the predicaments that SP participants may experience due to separation. These

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predicaments are: emotional loneliness, stigmatisation by others, objections from family members, and social isolation.

Chapter 6 and 7 discuss the ways in which SPs participate in the HCS and in what respects their participation serves to empower them. The attention of Chapter 6 is on SPs' activities in the public spaces of the website, such as forums. These activities include informational help, emotional support, and providing each other company. Chapter 7 moves to SPs' interactions in private spaces, such as private messages and offline settings, which give rise to friendships. As a result, Chapter 7 considers how SP participants initiate and develop friendships. An account of the vulnerability and benefit of online relationships is also given at the end of chapter 7.

Chapter 8 details the norms and values constructed in the HCS. It explains how these norms are developed, and how they are maintained and reinforced. It concludes by a discussion of whether participation in the HCS is liberating or oppressive. The final conclusions revisit the research methods and the key findings of the project, explicate the contributions of this study to the topic area, draw policy implications, reflect on the limitations of the study, and suggest areas for future research.

Chapter 1 Chinese Seafaring Families and Loneliness

Through a review of existing literature, this chapter provides some background information about seafaring families and problems caused by separations between seafaring couples. The first section describes briefly the situation of Chinese seafarers and their families. In general, China supplies a large number of seafarers; Chinese seafaring couples are likely to endure long term separations; and Chinese seafaring families, especially the younger generation, tend to be geographically separated. The focus of the second section is the major problem associated with absent partners – loneliness which seafarer-partners (SPs) are likely to face irrespective of their nationalities. In this section, we will discuss the nature and SPs' experiences of loneliness and their coping strategies.

1.1 A Brief Introduction to Chinese Seafaring Families

China is one of the major seafarer supplying countries. According to the *BIMCO/ISF 2000 Manpower Update*, there were 1,227,000 active seafarers working in the international fleet in 2000; the Philippines occupied the top rank with 230, 000 seafarers, while China ranked fourth with 82, 017. This survey however only took account of seafarers working in the deep-sea fleet and it has been criticised for under-estimating the actual number of Chinese seafarers (Li and Wonham, 1999; Leggate, 2004). According to Chinese official figures, there were around 500,000 Chinese seafarers in 2001, 160,000 of them working in the deep-sea fleet, and another 340, 000 in coastal and river fleets (Hand, 2001; ILO, 2002). Besides the existing seafarers, China also supplies large numbers of new seafarers each year. By 2002, there were around 25 maritime universities and training institutes in China, and the combined output of cadets was 4,000 (Shen *et al.*, 2005; Wu, 2007). By 2005, the cadet output was expected to reach 8,000 (Wu and Liang, 2005).

While seafarers from developed countries have the opportunity to enjoy a short sailing contract, often less than half a year, it is not unusual for Chinese seafarers to serve on board for around one year (Thomas *et al.*, 2003). During the sailing contract period, seafaring couples usually have to endure separation and associated problems which we will discuss in the next section. Ship visits are a common practice for Chinese seafarers' wives while their husbands' ships are in Chinese ports. Wives usually make

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long journeys, sometimes across half of China, with their children or even extended family, to meet their husbands. In the past, they may have spent several days with their husbands onboard the ship. However, the development of shipping technology means less time in port and so it reduces their opportunity for such visits or result in the wife taking several days to reach the ship but spending only a few hours with her partner actually on the ship (Thomas *et al.*, 2003). While in most states seafarer officers have the opportunity to take their wives sailing with them, this practice was not allowed in China due to safety considerations until recently. In July of 2000 a military coup took place in the Solomon Islands. The state owned and operated China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) ship *Yangjianghe* evacuated 117 overseas Chinese out of there safely. As a reward, in the same year, the Communication Ministry awarded three senior officers of *Yangjianghe* the opportunity to take their wives sailing with them (Ye, 2003). This was a breakthrough and also a trial period. After that, COSCO submitted a proposal to the Communication Ministry, suggesting that the former policy should be changed and that seafarer wives should be granted the opportunity to sail with their husbands. In April of 2003, this proposal was agreed upon (Ye, 2003). In the following year, COSCO *Guanzhou* branch was chosen to launch this new policy. On July 8th of 2004, two seafarer wives boarded the vessel *Tangquan* and started sailing with their husbands (Enorth, 2004), and later on another three boarded the vessel *Minjiang* (Yuan, 2004). So far, this policy is still in the trial phase and no other seafarer wives have yet had the same opportunity.

Instead of living in closely bound communities, most Chinese seafaring families today are geographically dispersed. In the era of planned economy, state owned (shipping) companies in China took 'total' care of their employees in the sense that the former were responsible for the latter's medical care, pension, and housing for a life time. These companies built residence blocs – seafarer villages – and allocated them to their employees in the local port cities. For those seafarers who did not live in the cities where their companies were located, they might be eligible for a one-off housing subsidy to buy a house locally. Certainly, obtaining a house or housing subsidy from companies was not easy and the waiting lists were usually long. With the economic reform, state companies gradually shed off the function of housing their employees. By the end of the 20th century, seafarers working for state owned companies could no longer expect to be allocated a house but turned to the open estate market individually

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(Wu, 2007). Moreover, the transformation from a planned economy to a market one has encouraged the establishment of many non-state or non-local-government owned shipping companies whose employees are supposed to buy their own houses from the market. As a result, except a minority and the older generation of them, most Chinese seafaring families live separately rather than clustered in 'seafarer villages'.

Before the economic reform, China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) and its regional branches monopolised the operation of the Chinese foreign going fleet (Frankel, 1998). Having considered that seafarers working on the foreign going fleet were away from home for a long time and that their wives had difficulty in shouldering family responsibilities alone, the trade unions of COSCO and its affiliated branches organised 'Seafarer Wife Committees' and 'Seafarer Wife Stations' (Shen et al., 2005; Thomas et al., 2003). The purpose of both the committees and stations was to provide mutual support for seafarers' wives while their husbands were at sea. Seafarers on leave also took part in them to provide whatever support they could to those in need. These organisations are still in operation and they do improve seafarers' and their wives' social welfare. There are some reports singing positive praise to those committed members (e.g. Yun, 2004; Xu, 2005).

However, this system also has its limitations. Firstly, it is the relic of the former planned economy, and with the economic reform, this kind of service is diminishing (Thomas et al., 2003). Secondly, such supportive networks are only for COSCO seafaring families. The economic reform has opened the international shipping market to all shipping companies. As a result, there were 175 shipping companies operating internationally by March 31, 2003 (MSA, 2003). Those recently established companies did not set up support groups for seafarers' wives. Thirdly, Zhao and Amante (2003) reported that 'Wife Committees' and 'Wife Stations' were not effective in inland areas where seafarer families were not clustered together in close communities. With the fast economic development, the east coast where most seafarers came from in the past has become relatively affluent. Improved living standards, together with a booming economy providing more and more well-paid positions ashore, make young people in east coast cities reluctant to seek a job at sea (LSM, 2002; Chamber, 2003). Now, it tends to be difficult to recruit seafarers from these areas. The maritime education and training institutions have therefore shifted

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their recruitment focus from east to west and from cities to rural areas (Zhao, 2000; Zhao and Amante, 2003). Thus, seafarers are becoming more and more diverse in terms of their regional origins and locations, and their families are more likely to be dispersed and less likely to provide mutual support. Having briefly described the situation of Chinese seafaring families, I shall turn to the common problem that seafaring families are likely to face – loneliness.

1.2 Loneliness

The seafaring job entails separation between seafaring couples, which may make seafarer-partners' feel lonely and isolated. In this section, we will briefly discuss the nature and origin of loneliness and review the literature on seafarer-partners' experiences of loneliness and isolation.

1.2.1 The nature of loneliness

When children are small, they tend to follow and cling to their care-givers or mothering figures, and cannot tolerate the absence of the latter. Once their carers are out of sight, they protest by crying and search for them with anxiety and apprehension. While the mothering figures are around, they are willing to go out to explore the nearby world. But they soon come back to their care-givers, and then go out again maybe for a longer period before coming to their carers once more. It seems that there is an invisible elastic bond between children and the mothering figures. When one child is attracted by other similar age children and goes to play with them, he/she keeps looking for the care-giver at intervals to make sure that the latter is around. If suddenly the sight of the carer is lost, the child will stop playing and become preoccupied with searching for him/her. Based on these observations, Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1980) developed 'attachment theory'. He argues that like other species, human children always try to maintain proximity to their care-givers, that is, they engage in attachment behaviour. While the proximity to their mothering figures is maintained, children feel safe and at ease. Otherwise, they manifest separation anxiety which is characterised by apprehension, crying, anxiety and distress.

Inspired by the attachment theory and based on his study of Parents Without Partners – an organisation of single parents, Weiss (1973, 1989) found that the loneliness

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symptoms that some single parents show were similar to children's behaviour when their attachment figures were not available. Therefore, he argued that the children's attachment behaviour was transformed when they grow up – their attachment figures shifted from their caretakers to other persons, most commonly, to their marital partners. Thus, adults felt secure and happy, and were able to concentrate on other things, when their attachment figures were perceived around. If otherwise, they felt anxious, depressed and lost concentration – the symptoms of loneliness. Weiss (1973, 1989) names this phenomenon 'the loneliness of emotional isolation', which he describes as the subjective response to the absence of the attachment figure.

Besides 'the loneliness of emotional isolation', Weiss (1973) identified another form of loneliness – 'the loneliness of social isolation', which is due to the absence of a proper social network. Children are not satisfied with merely ensuring that their attachment figures are available. They are attracted by and find enjoyment from playing with other children. During the course of growing up, children's ability to stretch the 'elastic bond' between them and their carers becomes stronger and stronger. They spend more and more time playing with each other. Through this social participation, the adolescence achieves a self definition partly by reference to his/her peers and by the position he/she holds in the peer group. In a latter stage, the social interaction helps one to construct and sustain one's identity (Weiss, 1973). If one is marginalised and not accepted by the peer group, or if one's social network is broken for whatever reasons, he/she will feel painful and distressed. This gives rise to 'the loneliness of social isolation'. Similar to 'the loneliness of emotional isolation' which, Weiss postulates, originates from the child's fear of being abandoned by the parents, 'the loneliness of social isolation' is, in Weiss' (1973) view, the development of the child's feeling of being left out by the peer group.

It has to be noted that although attachment theory is one of the most profound lines of research in psychology nowadays (Cassidy and Shave, 1999), it is also criticised for its evolutionary and biological determinism (e.g. Birns, 1999; Bliwise, 1999; Franzblau, 1999a; 1999b). As Bliwise (1999: 43) argues,

> What is problematic about attachment theory and research is [the] emphasis on attachment bonds as natural, self-evident and unequivocal outcomes of mothering and attachment behaviors and traits as fixed and stable properties of separate, autonomous

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individuals.

Birns (1999) points out that other than mothers, cultural and structural factors, poverty and social class, for example, play an important role in children's development. Attachment theory overlooks these factors and implicitly serves to blame women/mothers for the failure of children (Franzblau, 1999a; 1999b). Further, by stressing the importance of the infant-mother relationship, attachment theory is seen by many authors as putting the burden of child-rearing unequally on the shoulders of mothers and thus confining women to the domestic sphere (Bliwise, 1999; Franzblau, 1999b).

The existence of those weak points does not mean, however, that attachment theory should be completely rejected. Rather, Bliwise (1999) points out that the study of attachment should expand the narrow focus holding mothers responsible for their children's development to include other dimensions of attachment behaviour, such as attachment to fathers, siblings, other caregivers, peers, and sexual partners, and recognise the role that culture and social structure play. In fact, Weiss' categorisation of two types of loneliness is an extension of the original attachment theory. It is related to adult's attachment to their partners. More recent studies also suggest that romantic relationships between adults can be seen as attachment bonds (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Shaver and Hazan, 1988; 1999). This expansion helps to explain SPs' experiences of loneliness, as we will see next.

1.2.2 Emotional isolation associated with intermittent partner absence

Children's attachment bond to their carers is strong; however, in the process of maturation this attachment undergoes transformation. The role that caregivers play as attachment figures wanes as the children grow up and develop intimate relationships with their peers or other people. Weiss (1973) suggests that for adolescents their attachment system reorganises and their attachment figures are transferred to their intimate partners from their caregivers. The studies of Hazan and Shaver (1987; see also Shaver and Hazan, 1988; 1999) showed that there are strong parallels between infant attachment, i.e. caregiver attachment, and adult romantic love. These studies, together with later studies (for a review, see Feeney and Noller, 1996), established the perspective that falling in love is an attachment process. Thus, it is not surprising that

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empirical studies found that the presence of romantic partners is negatively correlated to emotional loneliness (DiTommaso and Spinner, 1997; Russell *et al.*, 1984).

Since partners may be their attachment figures, it is reasonable to assume that wives are likely to suffer the loneliness of emotional isolation when their partners are absent. Past research on off-shore oil workers' wives verified this. Morrice (1981) noticed that the wives of off-shore workers showed similar symptoms of bereavement crisis in a psychiatric clinic. Bereavement crisis is characterised by loneliness. For example, Lopata (1969) noted 11 forms of loneliness among widows, and Parkes (1973) identified five components of the behaviour of a bereaved woman searching for her lost son – the attachment figure. In a study of north-sea off-shore workers' wives, Morrice *et al.* (1985) found that one type of response by wives to their husbands' absence was feeling lonely, incomplete, anxious, and depressed. For example, one oil worker's wife felt abandoned when her husband was off-shore; she stayed in bed for most of the day paying little attention to other things, though she was an attractive and competent businesswoman when her husband was home; these responses were similar to that of children who were detached from their care-givers. Morrice *et al.* (1985) also found that the level of anxiety and depression that wives reported to have experienced when their partners were off-shore was five times higher than that when their husbands were home. In another study of off-shore oil workers' wives (Taylor *et al.*; 1985), one third of sampled 'oil wives' reported to have felt stressed when their husbands were away at sea.

Past research on seafarers' wives also suggested that separation was likely to cause emotional isolation. In a sample of navy wives, Brown-Decker (1978) found that lack of companionship and loneliness were reported to be two major problems faced by these wives. These problems manifested themselves more severely in the night and on the weekend because these times are usually reserved for family life. In a study of Australian seafarers' wives, 79 percent reported that they experienced stress when their partners were away (Foster and Cacioppe, 1986). Parker *et al.*' (1998) study of wives of Great Barrier Reef pilots showed that sixty percent of the sampled wives reported to have experienced stress when their husbands were away. These studies illustrated that wives were likely to suffer emotional isolation when their partners were away.

1.2.3 Social isolation associated with intermittent partner absence

When their partners are away, wives remain home and stay involved in their everyday social networks. It is not unreasonable to assume that they will not suffer from social isolation. However, this may not be the case. In Brown-Decker's (1978) study of navy wives, 49 percent of the sample reported social isolation. The study on Great Barrier Reef pilots' wives showed that between 30 to 40 percent of them reported to have little or no positive social interaction (Parker *et al.*, 1998). Thomas' (2003) recent research found that the leisure activities that most British seafarers' wives took in part were home and family-based and those not involving other persons. In cases other than seafarer-partners, many army wives in Bey and Lange's study (1974) complained that their friends and their families had difficulties to empathise with their special situation and thus they had no one to talk about their problems with when their husbands were away. The absence of commercial airline pilots is relatively short. However, pilot wives also revealed that they felt socially isolated (Cooper and Sloan, 1985).

Rather than personal traits or personalities, past studies suggested that the intermittent partner absence had a negative impact on wives' social activities. When their partners were away, these women were temporarily assigned a 'single status' (Thomas, 2003). All wives in Bey and Lange's study (1974) complained of their social situation as awkward: they were married, but their husbands were not around, and therefore could not fit with either single friends or married couples. This situation made them unwilling to participate in social events. On the one hand, they feared that their 'single status' may attract unwelcome male attention. Infidelity on the part of waiting wives was a social taboo. One army wife revealed that having male friends and even contact with males at work were viewed as infidelity by others (Bey and Lange, 1974). On the other hand, they felt that they were perceived by partnered women as 'sexual predators' (Thomas, 2003). These feelings resonated with that of American widows in Lopata's (1969) study of loneliness. In that study, some widows felt that their status had dropped and they had become 'second-class citizens'. As a result, these widows were alienated by their social networks which were dominated by couples and there were no single women's networks for them. Other widows in Lopata's study felt that

they were 'a fifth wheel' and their status made their presence in the social event awkward. This study also found that hostesses welcomed single male guests but they tried various ways to avoid inviting their divorced or widowed female friends.

When partners are absent, all the domestic responsibilities fall on wives. According to Thomas (2003) in her study of British seafaring families, if they had children, especially young babies whose care is time and energy-demanding, the wives' social role as mothers made them prioritise child care. While employing a baby sitter may relieve them for a while, these wives did not think it financially justifiable. Therefore, their opportunities to participate in social events tended to be severely constrained.

Thomas' (2003) research further suggested that seafarers' intermittent presence at home may also have had a detrimental effect on wives' social participation. O'Connor (1991) found that unemployed men did not like their wives either to visit or be visited by friends. Thomas noted that seafaring husbands may have been in a similar position. Furthermore, wives themselves were reluctant to socialise outside. They wanted to share more time with their partners alone at home, since they perceived the time that they could be together as precious. Thus, the wives' social participation was adversely affected by both their husbands' intermittent absence and home.

Because of their partners' work pattern, seafarers' wives have to face separation and intermittent absence of partners, which makes them experience different lifestyles to other women whose husbands work ashore. As a result, seafarers' wives in Thomas' (2003) study tended to separate themselves from others, since they felt that mutual understanding was poor between them and other women. Foster and Cacioppe's respondents also pointed out that only those familiar with the seafaring life could understand their concerns fully. Maybe for this reason, nearly 53 percent Great Barrier Reef pilots' wives in the study of Parkers *et al.* (1998) revealed that they had no close friends with whom they could share their most private feelings, and around 50 percent of British seafarers' wives in Thomas' study (2003) reported to have no one to confide with their private concerns.

1.2.4 Coping strategies

Rokach and Brock (1998) categorised loneliness coping strategies into three clusters: 'Acceptance and Resource Development', 'Distancing and Denial', and 'Building Social Bridges'. The first cluster includes three factors:

- Reflection and Acceptance, which emphasises solitary reflection and acceptance of loneliness
- Self-development and Understanding, which stresses belief in and understanding of oneself
- Religion and Faith

The second cluster includes unhealthy behaviours such as using alcohol and drugs. The third cluster includes two factors: Social Support Networks (such as increased social involvement and interactions with others) and Increased Activity (such as devoting oneself to work or other activities).

Past research on intermittent partners showed that lone partners employed all three forms of coping strategies in their day-to-day lives. According to Parker *et al.* (1998), the wives of Australian pilots perceived themselves as resourceful and strong. British seafarer-partners in Thomas's (2003) study also learned to be independent and strong. These suggested that many seafarers' wives learnt to accept loneliness. In terms of 'Distancing and Denial' coping strategies, eight percent of Australian seafarers' wives in Foster and Cacioppe's (1986) 130 respondents reported that they used medicine to cope.

Social support networks seemed very helpful for lone wives. Morrice *et al.*'s study (1985) suggested that 'oil wives' who were highly involved in community tended to be 'successful copers'. In order to have access to the long-established social network to lessen isolation, some seafarers' wives lived close to their families. One seafarer's wife in Thomas' (2003: 97) study described her strategy in a close family scenario responded:

> This house's an open house, everybody's in and out [..] friends, cousins, children. It was like a port of call, that's what my father-in-law used to say. So no, I was never lonely.

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Similarly, James' (2000) study showed that in New Iberia – an off-shore oil worker community, it was common for native oil wives to live near to their relatives in order to acquire valuable support.

According to Weiss's assumption, wives' emotional loneliness is unavoidable while their husbands are away. However, the communication between husbands and wives is not completely unavailable for seafaring families. In the past, they could communicate through letters. In the era of modern technology, telephone and email help separated couples to keep in touch and maintain an emotional closeness, thus alleviating emotional loneliness. Communication, however, is not without its problems. Communication from ship to shore, from a foreign country to home, or the other way around certainly may be inconvenient and expensive (Alderton *et al.*, 2004; Thomas *et al.*, 2003). For some families, this is a luxury. In addition, communication sometimes can be emotionally upsetting: rather than eroding loneliness, it can sometimes make couples miss each other more (Thomas, 2003).

Boynton and Pearce (1978) argue that individuals are unable to cope with all kinds of stresses sufficiently; and that increasingly in a modern society, individuals need help from others or depend on social institutions to cope with the stresses of the modern age. Thus, various clubs, societies, and other mutual support organisations are set up. During the Vietnam War, military wives in the USA organised themselves into groups (Bey and Lange, 1974). They usually met once a month to plan for social activities and to share experiences and information. These organisations helped waiting wives to release stress. The British Navy provided married quarters for navy couples (Chandler, 1989). There were clubs and social activities that were geared towards lonely waiting wives. For this reason, Chandler (1989) found that some naval wives preferred to stay in the married quarters rather than go back to live with their parents in spite of the many drawbacks.

While British seafarers' wives in Thomas' study (2003) suggested that contact with other seafaring families was a good strategy since they had similar experiences and Australian pilot wives pointed out that a support groups for pilot wives would be helpful (Parker *et al.*, 1998), merchant seafarers' families in general no longer tended

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to live in seafarer communities. Equally, seafaring families in China have become more geographically dispersed as showed in section 1.1.

The above mentioned services appear to address more social than emotional loneliness. It seems that sailing with husbands is the best way for seafarers' wives to avoid emotional loneliness. All British seafaring wives in Thomas' (2003) study that had had opportunities to sail regarded this as a great advantage: not only could they be together with their husbands, but also it promoted a better understanding of their husbands' working and living conditions. However, not all wives have this opportunity (Thomas *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, most wives have their own employment or careers or they have to be home taking care of their children. In China, as mentioned in section 1.1, sailing with husbands is highly unlikely so far.

Like seafarers' wives in other nations, Chinese seafarer-partners (SPs) cannot avoid the problems associated with intermittent partner absence and many of them, especially young ones, do not live in proximity of each other and therefore can hardly provide mutual support. Though the number of Chinese seafarers is expanding, the institutional support from companies is diminishing. Furthermore, compared with seafarers' wives in developed countries, Chinese SPs may have to endure longer term separation for Chinese seafarers are more likely to serve onboard for one year or above.

Chapter 2 Relationships and Internet Use

The broad aim of the study is to investigate how the usage of the Home of Chinese Seafarers (HCS) website helps Chinese seafarer-partners (SPs) to cope with problems associated with separation. The last chapter reviewed the existing literature on loneliness which SPs are likely to experience. In this chapter, another three bodies of literature will be discussed in order to provide a broad context for and to locate the current study. The first section provides a historical account of romantic love and reviews contemporary theories of doing intimate relationships. At the end of this, the focus will turn to marital relationships in China. In the second section, friendship and the roles it plays in society will be discussed. The last section moves to literature on the Internet and outlines the debates on the emancipatory potentials associated with Internet use.

2.1 Romantic Love and Intimate Relationships

Love has been one of the major themes of world literature. It is regarded to help integrate people together and provide individuals with a means of transcending the drudgery of the routine and the ordinary (Bertilsson, 1986). However, love has its anti-social side and may be self-centred (Jackson, 1993). It has the potential to create jealousy, the will to possession, and the exclusion of the third party (Weber, 1948). Moreover, as Weber (1948: 348) has put it, '[p]retending to be the most humane devotion, it is a sophisticated enjoyment of oneself in the other'. Parsons (1978) noticed that the other side of love is hatred. Similarly, Freud (2002) believed that love is intertwined with and accompanied by aggression. Thus, it has been suggested that sexual love is in constant conflict with civilisation (Freud, 2002) and Christian religion (Weber, 1948). Without circumscription, it is feared that its darker side would destroy the society. Therefore, love is always subject to social regulation.

Love happens not merely in Western societies, but may appear in any place and any society (Giddens, 1992; Lindholm, 1999). Drawing on classical literature and ethnographic records, Lindholm (1999) has shown that a similar phenomenon to Western romantic love exists in various societies, even 'primitive' ones. However, different societies have different structures and thus the social regulation of love takes

different forms. The realisation of love has to fit with the social structure in which it is embedded. In other words, the way in which love is manifested is culturally specific (Giddens, 1992). Thus, it is also important to see how love is socially tailored by dominant social structures.

2.1.1 The evolution of romantic love

Generally, it is held that the cultural phenomenon of romantic love started in the 12th century Europe. At that time in the Provence region of southern France there emerged troubadours who wandered from castle to castle singing romantic poems that depicted courtly love to their ladies. These troubadours collectively created and circulated a set of ideas, practices, and codes of behaviour about love. With the aids of several noblemen, the influence of these troubadours spread to Germany and England. Courtly love exalted in these poems became an ideal way of life in European court society. According to Featherstone (1999) and Paz (1996), besides the cultural tradition, it is the social and economic condition of the 12th century Europe that made the popularity of troubadours possible. First, the relative affluence not only produced a leisured class which sought refined pleasures, but also facilitated Europe's contact with the outside world. The Provencal troubadours drew upon Arabic cultural elements and created romantic poetry. Secondly, the status of women was raised. Unlike their grandmothers, aristocratic women were no longer excluded from public gatherings. Marital loyalty was not strict; lords were often far away from home at war, leaving their wives governing their castles.

Romantic love in the Middle Ages was poetic rather than sexual, as Weber (1948: 344) has suggested, the conventions of knighthood regulated love by 'veiling the natural and organic basis of sexuality'. At that time western societies were stratified, the families of the upper strata were tightly connected with economic and political powers, and marriage was arranged to further the power of the family. The troubadours' love for their ladies was never consummated due to the former's lower social position. It was a kind of refined and purified love that expressed a lofty sentiment (Paz, 1996). Meanwhile, romantic love at that age was only restricted to certain groups of people and the boundaries in terms of who could love whom, when and where were very clear (Luhmann, 1986).

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Accompanying changes in social structure in Western societies, romantic love gradually gained popularity and became the foundation of marriage. In the transition from feudal societies to market ones, the social structure of Western societies was shifting correspondingly from a stratified one to a functional one. The newly developed functional systems replaced upper class families in playing political, religious, and economic functions. The family ties created by marriage lost its former social significance. According to Luhmann (1986), the socio-structural reasons for marriage controls in upper class were thus removed. On top of that, the easily available romantic literature in the 18th and 19th centuries made it natural that marriage should be based on love (Giddens, 1992; Luhmann, 1986). Moreover, the increased mobility forced people to leave their villages, freeing them from kinship obligations. Paralleling the development of free market economy and democratic polity, then, individualism was spreading (Oliker, 1998). This furthered the market of free emotional exchange. Romantic love was seen to increasingly become the overture of marriage.

Love and marriage, however, have contradictory features. The former, according to Weber (1948: 347), is passionate, inexplicable, 'inaccessible to any rational endeavour', and 'equivalent to the 'having' of the mystic'; or in Goodison's (1987) words, 'really being in love means wanting to live in a different world'. Freud (1977) pointed out that the excitement of love depends on setting up obstacles to resist satisfaction. Once all the obstacles have been overcome, gratification erodes romantic love little by little (Wilson, 1983). Thus, romantic love assumes insecurity (Jackson, 1995). In contrast, marriage is meant to be down-to-earth and realistic; it assumes routine and mundane life; and it is expected to be a secure and durable relationship. Maybe for this reason, people soon found out that marriage based on passionate love is unlikely to make the couple 'happy ever after' as popular romance literature suggests. This subjects romantic love to criticism.

2.1.2 Criticisms of romantic love

The criticism of romantic love has a long history. The 17th century French moralist La Rochefoucauld viewed romantic love as fiction. He stated, 'many people would not

have fallen in love had they not heard of it' (Quoted in Illouz, 1999). For him, romantic love is just an imagination induced by fictional literature. It destroys reason and produces false knowledge. Marriage based on that therefore is irrational and results in unhappiness. Evans (1999) demonstrated, the sceptical view on this was continued by the 19th and 20th century both male and female novelists. Jane Austin, for example, kept criticising the irrationality of romantic love. She constantly mocked and satirised her heroes and heroines who desire to fall in love. For her, marriage should be based on mutual respect and understanding which are grounded in a real social as well as personal world; the marriage based on dizzy, irrational, otherworldly romantic passion and attraction is doomed to failure.

The most vehement criticism of romantic love was from Left-wing feminists in the 1960's and 1970's, but from a different perspective (see Goodison, 1987; Jackson, 1993; Wilson, 1983). At that time, marriage in the West usually led to a nuclear family where the husband was the bread-earner and worked outside while the wife stayed home and took care of the husband and children. Feminists viewed this family model as oppressive for women and romantic love which resulted in such a family merely as a means to maintain and reinforce patriarchy. 'It starts when you sink into his arms and ends with your arms in his sink.' This slogan shows left-feminists' view of romantic love. Romance was seen as an ideology that made women passive and dependent: being engaged in and obsessed with romance, women enslaved and humbled themselves; they made one man their emotional centre and ignored other important relationships; they spent all their energy revolving around one man's world at the cost of their own possible achievements; they gave more affection while received little in return; by reading romance, women allowed themselves to become immersed in dreams, to escape from reality, and to stop themselves from fighting for equality. Thus, romantic love was regarded by some feminists as sugar coated poison: it served to tie women to the end of marriage - an oppressive institution for women. For the Left, it was wrong to repress one's sexuality to fit into the monogamous institution. They advocated for sexual liberalisation.

Sexual revolution helped to put sexuality on the centre stage of love. Women no longer just took passive roles in romantic love; they participated actively in talking and fulfilling their sexual fantasies (Wilson, 1983; Wouters, 1999). From then on,

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Wouter (1999) points out, women in Western countries have been searching for a balance between love and sex.

The political and intellectual movement of feminism, however, does not stop people from falling in love. According to Stacey and Pearce (1995: 12), '[w]e may (as individuals, as communities, as nations) no longer *believe* in love, but we still fall for it'. The Left feminists' view that romance is 'false-consciousness' and therefore should be discarded has been challenged. Wilson (1983) points out that left feminists have gone too far to politicise emotions. In the view of the Left, what culture supports are reactionary and wrong; and what women feel are always politically correct. Women are encouraged, and in fact required, to pursue their sexuality without any constrain. According to Freud (1977), a barrier is needed to prevent the fulfilment of desires in order to enjoy love. By removing constraints around sexuality, Wilson argues, women have lost the pleasure promised by romantic love. Sexual revolution legitimated switching love objects as frequently as one wishes. This led Baruch (1991) to argue that sexual liberalisation actually promotes narcissism: people do not glorify and idealise their love objects any more, since there are many of them easily available; rather than putting others on glorifying pedestals as happened in traditional romantic stories, people climb on and idealise themselves there.

As a result, romance has been revisited more recently (Pearce and Stacey, 1995). It has been recognised that it is neither possible nor necessary to discard romantic love. Instead of trying to demolish romantic love, Jackson (1993; 1995) tries to explain romantic love in order to get a better critical perspective. According to her, love is socially constructed since people are surrounded by love stories from an early age. On the one hand, these narratives shape individuals' emotions; on the other, they actively organise their experiences of emotions around, and fit them into, the conventions of these narratives. In this process, they construct emotions and the sense of what being in love should be. Since people live in this culturally and historically specific world, they cannot immunise themselves from the construction of romantic love, and it becomes 'a site of women's complicity in patriarchal relations' (Jackson, 1995: 50). As a result, romance is still appealing. These narratives and the consumption of them however, according to Jackson (1993), are gendered. On the one hand, women are depicted as emotional and men as rational; on the other, men and boys are normally

excluded or they exclude themselves from romance culture in order to construct their sense of maleness. Duncombe and Marsden (1993; 1995a; 1995b; see also Jackson, 1993; 1995) argue that there is a 'gender asymmetry' in doing emotional labour and romance. Thus, feminists point out that women are being emotionally exploited.

However, it can hardly be denied that love is also biologically grounded (Craib, 1998; Shilling, 1997), as Goodison (1983: 51) has put it, 'the central drive of falling in love seems to be more of a blood-and-guts affair'. Love is a kind of emotion. Elias (1987) argues that emotions have both learnt and unlearnt components; and that for human beings, although learnt behaviours dominate over unlearnt drives, they are connected and the latter is the foundation of the former. Romance discourse, and social, economic, and political forces do play an important role in shaping our subjective feelings of love. It is true that romantic love has its culturally and historically specific language, behaviour, and practices. Yet, we should also acknowledge that love has an unlearnt component, around which the learnt component is constructed. Maybe partly because of this, it seems that people are still fascinated by romantic stories and are searching for love. After all, romance is still the major theme of popular culture. What has been changed, however, appears to be the practice of doing intimacy, to which we turn next.

2.1.3 Contemporary theories of intimate relationships

The Women's Movement in the 1960s has to a certain extent emancipated women. Legally, women and men are equal; and they have equal education and employment opportunity. A large number of (married) women have entered the labour market. The old one-bread-earner nuclear family model is largely replaced by the two-income-earner one. In a sense, women in the West have gained economic independence. At the same time, women are more and more dissatisfied with men's lack of intimacy and divorce has become common (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

Against this backdrop, Giddens (1992) observes a 'transformation of intimacy'. In the past, marriage and family had external ties outside itself, such as economic necessity and traditional obligations. Nowadays, both men and women can be economically independent and traditional duties on couples have been largely removed; and

marriage forever is no longer taken for granted. As such, Giddens argues that intimate relationships are increasingly formed on the basis of mutual trust generated and worked out through intimate and mutual self-disclosure rather than external influences. Without external constraints, Giddens continues, such a relationship becomes free-floating and tends to be a 'pure relationship', which 'refers to a situation where the social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it' (1992: 58). The involved parties in the pure relationship appear to be self-centred: their commitment to stay in the relationship lasts as long as when they are able to generate enough satisfaction from it. For Giddens, such a relationship is emancipating; it does not constitute a barrier for individuals to pursue self-growth and self-actualisation, since it can be terminated at the individual's will.

For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), however, contemporary intimate relationships result in a 'normal chaos'. They argue that the underlying cause of the chaos is 'individualization' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; 2001). The latter has two layers of meaning. One layer of it refers to the fact that individuals have been largely released from the hand of traditional authorities, such as religion, customs, and family obligations and duties, and therefore become freer to choose their own lifestyles. The other layer of 'individualization' is related to the current social situation, under which, according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, social actors, both men and women, are forced by the labour market, the education system and the welfare state to be responsible for their own life-courses individually. When external controls on doing relationships fade away, couples find that many things which their (grand)parents used to take for granted now are open to questions, justification, revision and rearrangement. They have to negotiate and make decisions on things, for example, who does cooking and washing and when they should have a child, and when and who takes care of the children. In a sense, couples are caught in the conflict between individual preferences and the shared life. Furthermore, because of individualization, both men and women seek for freedom to pursue self-goals and self-interest. However, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim note that the attenuation of a community bond in the contemporary world makes people long for love even more; and that people rely more on sexual relationships for emotional support and to avoid loneliness. Thus,

contemporary couples want both the bond of love and the freedom for self-actualisation and are caught in the contradiction. As a result, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that doing intimate relationships becomes a constant war and a 'normal chaos'. In this context, though it is highly desirable, the intimate bond tends to be fragile – both parties are free to divorce, in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's words, 'as well as becoming more important love is becoming more difficult than ever' (p.70).

Bauman's (2003) account of 'liquid love' presents a more radical view of contemporary sexual relationships. By the word 'liquid', Bauman argues that love and relationships nowadays are very flexible and highly mobile in the sense that they can be easily generated, revoked, and shifted from one person to another. 'Liquid love' is like clothes: you can shop around for it; you can put it on in some occasions and take it off immediately when necessary; moreover, you can abandon it when out of fashion and shop for new ones. This flexibility, Bauman (2000) points out, does not necessarily lead to emancipation as Giddens suggests; instead of generating solidarity and facilitating co-operation, it spawns agonising conflicts and cut-throat competitions.

To what extend the concepts of the 'pure relationship', 'individualization', or 'liquid love' actually characterise the empirical world is highly debatable (see for example, Edgar, 2004; Jamieson, 1998; 1999; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). However, one can hardly deny that doing intimacy has undergone a transformation in the 20th century – people are freer to enter a relationship; yet they are also freer to break one and enter another. Intimate bonds, then, seem more vulnerable than they used to be. Certainly, the literature reviewed here is embedded in the Western world. Western cultures, however, have laid their marks and influences at Chinese doorstep and affected Chinese in terms of doing intimacy through globalisation especially after China opened its door to the outside world (Chen, 2005). Next, the focus will turn to China.

2.1.4 Marriage and sexual relationships in China

Under the influence of Western cultures and in the context of globalisation, the practice of marriage has also been transformed in China. In 1950 after the

establishment of the People's Republic of China, the *marriage law* was issued, which states that arranged marriages are illegal and that marriages should be based on mutual choice of involved individuals. Western romantic literature on the other hand influenced the new and educated generation of Chinese to seek for love as the foundation of marriages. In the 1960s and 70s, however, political movements distorted humanity and love in China. Dating was criticised as a kind of 'capitalist's sentiment'; talks about love between men and women, let alone sex, would be regarded as 'anti-revolutionary' and thus prohibited by the society; and love strived to be 'lofty and pure' (in the sense that both involved parties encouraged each other to focus on and sacrifice for the 'enterprise of communism', instead of indulging in 'reactionary' 'capitalist's sentiment') (Chen, 2005). Social life at that time was almost reduced to political life. Marriages, then, were heavily influenced by politics and the 'class struggle', since falling in love with and marrying a person from a politically 'reactionary' class or background was doomed. In the late 1970s, China ended the 'Cultural Revolution', turned its focus to economic development, and opened the door to the outside world. Since then, the political taint in love and thus marriages has started fading away. Discourse associated with Western lifestyles has surged into China through various media; romantic love, dating, and sex have been revived and are now regarded as important components for relationships (Chen, 2005). Of course, marriages are never merely based on 'pure' love. Economic interest always has a role to play. Nevertheless, when relationships and marriages have largely shed the function of reproduction and have become a matter of two individuals instead of two families, they are generally supposed to meet the emotional and sexual needs of both parties. This is the case particularly in cities and among the well-educated Chinese (Ding, 1997; Giddens, 1999).

Against this backdrop, intimacy becomes important in sexual relationships in China, especially among those developed from romantic love. It has also been reported that Chinese women value intimacy more than Chinese men do in heterosexual relationships (Chen, 2005). When one party becomes emotionally dissatisfied, he/she can choose to terminate the relationship. The comparative gender equality and women's economic independence have further lowered the barrier of such a choice. Probably, this is particularly so in urban China, where, according to Stockman (2000), both men and women in wedlock are economically active and therefore the marital

relationships are relatively egalitarian, compared with even Western societies. Official data shows that the divorce rates in China rose from 3.5%% in 1980 to 8.7%% in 1995 (Chen, 2005), and to 27.3%% in 2005 (CHINA POPIN, 2006). Under the influence of the Western world, there is another recent tendency among Chinese lovers: co-habiting. It has been estimated that there are ten million people co-habiting outside of marriage for emotional and sexual needs (Chen, 2005).

Thus, it seems that the newly gained relative freedom in doing intimacy in China also has mixed blessings: free to form a bond also implies free to break it and to establish another one. However, no matter how free a couple are in doing intimacy, their intimate bond is inevitably embedded in a web of various relationships (Pahl and Spencer, 2004), which would arguably affect the intimate relationship. Friendship, for example, constitutes one part of the web.

2.2 Friendship

As social beings, we feel safe and secure while embedded in supportive social networks. Besides love and marriage, friendship is also an important human bond which is able to provide us with many kinds of support and a sense of belonging. As a result, friendship is a crucial part of our social network. In this section, we will review the relevant literature.

2.2.1 Friendship, Modernisation and Kinship

The process of modernisation has been regarded as detrimental to friendship and other interpersonal relationships (Simmel, 1971; Tonnies, 1887/2001; Wirth, 1938). In pre-modern societies, people were embedded in densely knitted communities, which bound their kin, neighbours, and friends together in a shared territory. People acquired all sorts of resources and support from their communities. It was generally regarded that such community ties were strong. In modern societies, however, capitalists' mass production requires a large number of geographically and socially mobile labour. This forces people to move out of their community, and makes them subject to constant moves and become isolated in society. For Wirth (1938), urbanisation which was characterised by a large number of heterogeneous residents densely dwelling in cities

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led to superficial, fleeting, and anonymous interpersonal relationships, and weakened primary social structures and normative consensus. Thus traditional communities were dying, and kinship, neighbourhood and friendship were doomed.

Parsons (1959) drew another picture of modern American society, which claimed that community ties were no longer important and necessary. He argued that the marriage bond was the only important and at the same time sufficient primary relationship. Marriage was a personal choice, rather than arranged by family. This free choice allowed the couple to express their affective feelings and provide enough emotional support. Due to mobility and American tradition, isolated nuclear families did not expect much support from their kin and friends. It was enough to deal with all sorts of problems while meeting the demand of mass production. Thus the nuclear family household had become a private, emotionally intense unit, which was practically independent of community ties.

The 'death of community' thesis has been cast in doubt in a large number of later urban ethnographic studies (e.g. Gans, 1962; Whyte, 1955). These studies noticed that strong and supportive community ties with kin, neighbour, and friends are abundant in urban areas and have survived the storm of modern industrial revolution. Fischer (1975) proposes a subcultural theory of urbanism. Cities consist of a set of subcultures or subcommunities. Each subcommunity is a village-like traditional community. Through exchange, negotiation and conflict, these subcultures connect with each other and are integrated together. Thus, urban residents are embedded in their own subcommunities and at the same time keep in touch with other subcommunities. Instead of weakening strong community ties, the urbanised way of life may provide people with more choices and a larger pool of friends (Fischer, 1982).

Similarly, Parsons' claim lost its ground soon and was subject to many attacks. Litwak and Szelenyi (1969) pointed out that nuclear families were not enough to deal with all sorts of problems; and that kin, friends, and neighbours were also primary groups providing valuable supports to nuclear families. Taking a functionalists' approach, Litwak and Szelenyi identified different functions performed by different primary groups. Nuclear family members took the tasks that required only two adults; kin could do the tasks that required low face-to-face interactions but long-term

commitments; friends were able to perform tasks that required the closest manifest agreement but maybe short-term involvement; neighbours were in the position to handle tasks that required everyday contact, and urgent and immediate actions. This kind of claim that kin and non-kin performed distinct functions and provided different services was criticised by Allan (1979) as too deterministic. For example, Allan argued, kin could be both neighbours and friends and therefore they could handle all kinds of tasks.

Although there are overlaps and no kind of support is sought exclusively from kin or friends, friendship is different to kinship. The former is voluntarily formed based on the free choices of the parties involved, while the latter is naturally given and fixed. According to Wolf (1966), friendship is achieved, while kinship is ascribed. Literature suggests that generally people treat kin and non-kin differently. Allan (1979) observed that kinship and friendship are usually carried on separately, and that except in special occasions, such as wedding ceremonies, people do not bring their friends and kin together. He argues that this is because these two relationships are based on different principles. The main purpose of most friendships is enjoyment. If they are found not enjoyable, they are likely to be terminated. While maintaining blood ties, rather than seeking enjoyment, is the end of kinship. rt In a British study, Willmott (1987) interviewed 163 suburban Londoners (79 men and 84 women) who were at nearly the same stage of life but from different classes. He found that generally respondents irrespective of class and gender turn to kin for financial supports and friends to confide personal problems. Some more recent studies also suggest that kin are more likely to provide instrumental support while friends tend to provide emotional support (Gerstel and Gallagher, 1994; Jerrome, 1990).

2.2.2 Types of friendships

Based on anthropological studies in Latin America and the European Mediterranean, Wolf (1966) differentiated emotional friendship and instrumental friendship. The former serves to release the ego from strains and pressures of role-playing, and from institutionalised obligations. It gives the ego a sense of security – he or she is not standing alone. Instrumental friendship provides people not only with resources but also with potential connection links, through which people establish connections with

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their friends' friends and thus access more resources. A small amount of affection is necessary in instrumental friendship. Without it, there is a great danger of disruption. Another difference between these two kinds of friendships is boundary. While emotional friendship is restricted to the closed dyadic circle, the boundary of instrumental friendship is open.

O'Connor (1998) identifies two other kinds of friendships. One is sociable friendship, which involves 'a kind of inarticulate solidarity which is reflected in routinised activity' (p. 125). This kind of friendship does not aim at emotional release or self-interests. Rather, socialisation is the end of itself. Men are stereotypically seen as enjoying this kind of friendship – male pub culture is a good example. Another one is the friendship that involves a caring component. It is usually between women. They use their time and energy to help those with whom they feel close or they identify emotionally.

The oldest account of friendship is probably offered by Aristotle (1955), who distinguished three kinds of friendships. The first one depends on utility. Both parties in this kind of relationship fulfil instrumental ends for each other. When one fails to do so, the relationship may come to the end. The second one is based on pleasure. Equally, when one party cannot provide pleasure for the other, such relationship may break up. The third one focuses on goodness. This is the perfect and ideal friendship. Though the friend is useful and pleasant, this is not the underpinning reason for this kind of relationship. Rather, in this friendship, one loves the other for his/her character, and cares for the other's well-being for his/her own sake.

Aristotle's concept of friendship seems still of relevance today. Wolf's (1966) differentiation of emotional friendship and instrumental friendship can be fitted into Aristotle's model. While the latter is arguably the same as friendship based on utility, the former is similar to friendship based on goodness – two involved individuals resonate emotionally with each other and care about each other's well-being. We can also see the essence of good friendship in O'Connor's (1998) caring friendship. In the latter, as in emotional friendship, friends identify with each other and protect each others' well-being. Friendship based on pleasure is recaptured by O'Connor's (1998) sociable friendship, which aims at sociability. Aristotle's influence seems evident in

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Pahl and Spencer's (2004) account of friendship. According to them, friendships are likely to provide four kinds of support: practical help, companionship and fun, emotional support, and listening ears for confiding. The last two items arguably are two sides of the same coin – a friend is likely to provide emotional support only when you reveal to him/her your problems.

2.2.3 Friendships between women

Though with controversies, it has been widely noticed that relationships between women exhibit more intimacy than those between men (e.g. Jamieson, 1998; Pahl, 2000). Duncombe and Marsden (1993; 1995a) termed this as the 'gender asymmetry' in emotional expression.

Both Allan (1989) and O'Connor (1998) argue that this difference between women and men is due to different principles of organising relationships. The evidence suggests to Allan (1989) that it is social structure that encourages men and women to develop different relationships. Men are likely to organise their same sex friendship around specific tasks and activities, sociability and enjoyment rather than personal matters being stressed in men's relationships. In contrast, Allan notes that women's same sex relationships are extensive. Instead of focusing on sociability, these kinds of relationships more emphasise on self-disclosure and empathy. Taking a feminists' approach, O'Connor (1998) argues that both friendships between men and between women reflect, and reinforce at the same time, the social structure. Men's relationships are more instrumental and motivated by their life ambitions and goals. Their friendship tends to be measured in terms of pragmatic usefulness, rather than in terms of intimacy disclosure. What they confide is achievements rather than personal failures and vulnerabilities. They use their friendship to access 'economic and political resources and validate their identity as men' (p. 123). By contrast, O'Connor notes, women are likely to organise their same sex relationships to share problems, reveal emotional vulnerabilities, and complain about their dependency. Hence, their friendship is revolving around 'shared victimisation' and more likely to be 'emotional friendship'. Doing friendships in this way, O'Connor argues, women validate their femaleness in these experiences and reinforce their powerlessness. Equally, though not taking a feminists' approach, Jerrome (1984) saw the tendency of friendships

between women towards reinforcing social and sexual divisions. Marks (1998) suggests that doing friendship between women is at the same time doing the gender, since in their conversation, women continually and collectively construct themselves as women, and even good women. Harrison (1998), however, doubts the view that friendships between women merely serve to reinforce the existing social structure. By 'analysing events, reflecting on incidents, making sense of subtle injustices, and challenging interpretations', Harrison (1998: 102) argues, women rebel against gender inequalities and dominant cultural ideas in conversion and employ 'strategies of resistance' in action.

No matter whether women's friendship is 'shared victimisation' or 'strategies of resistance', it is regarded beneficial in several aspects. Firstly, feminists argue that this is a patriarchal world, dominated by a male language and culture. The knowledge of this world is filtered through a male lens and women are viewed as the other. Their role as housewives and primary carers are not valued in dominant discourse. It is friendship between women that provide them the opportunity to validate their identity and experiences (Harrison, 1998; O'Connor, 1998). Secondly, being disillusioned by their husbands' emotional deficit, women find intimacy from friendship (Harrison, 1998; Oliker, 1998). Thirdly, with intimate friends, women can step out of their culturally imposed role to show the 'real' and 'authentic' self. Thus, Harrison's (1998) respondents felt safe to do foolish things, Jerrome's (1984) respondents could behave unconventionally, with their friends, and Jerrome (1984) noticed, women's friend meetings provided them with a temporary escape from their onerous feminine role. Fourthly, Oliker (1989) noted in her empirical study of friendship among a group married American women that these women depended heavily on their close female friends to diffuse and manage their marital tensions and problems. Hence, women's friendship may provide a safety valve and a backstage. On the one hand, it serves to discharge their discontents with, and strengthen their commitments to, their marriages (Jerrome; 1984; Oliker, 1989; 1998). On the other hand, it releases women for a little while from various tensions in life, and at the same time recharges them with full power and energy to face their everyday lives positively again. As a result, women's friendship is regarded as being positive to modern societies, which are plagued by high divorce rates and mounting mental and psychological disorders. Putnam (2000; see also Putnam and Goss, 2002) regards social networks as a form of capital – social

capital, which is beneficial for both the well-being of involved individuals and society as a whole. In this sense, women's friendship is an important form of social capital. It not only improves women's well-being, but also stabilises marriages and family relations and thus enhances the cohesion of the society in general.

Seeing things from this perspective, it appears that the concepts of 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992), and 'individualization' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; 2001) discussed in sub-section 2.1.3 have their limitations. According to these concepts, intimate relationships are individual and free choices; and individuals alone have to be responsible for and cope with the consequences of their choices. In the above discussion, however, we see that women's friendship helps women to iron out tensions and discontent generated in marriage and thus serves to protect the basic social structure. Thus, women, and arguably men as well, do not necessarily cope with their lives individually and alone. Instead, they implicitly or explicitly share their experiences with their friends and deal with problems together. Being embedded in such social networks, women's commitment to their marriages may be protected and reinforced as suggested by the above reviewed literature. Giddens and Beck and Beck-Geinsheim, then, ignore the role that friendship plays for individuals.

2.2.4 The social embeddedness and significance of friendships

Individual freedom is exercised in choosing friends. However, according to Allan (1998) and O'Connor (1998), exercising this freedom is influenced and constrained by social factors. The basic principles of friendship are equality and sharing something in common between two parties. Obviously, equality and reciprocation are difficult to maintain between people from different social and economic positions. Therefore, friendship has difficulty to transcend social factors, such as class, gender and race. More often than not, friendship is between people with similarities. Thus, Allan and Adams (1998) argue that friendships are both personal choices and social constructions; and that they are embedded socially, economically and culturally.

Friendship also plays an important role in society. Firstly, the embedment described above gives people a social identity. In post-modern societies where self-identity is no longer fixed, friendships become more important in terms of construction of identity (Allan and Adams, 1998; Pahl, 2000). Through the socialisation with friends in

similar social and economic position and keeping abreast with each other in terms of consumption, people maintain and reinforce existing social structures (Jerrome, 1984). Secondly, friendship offers affection and moral support, which release people from stress and produce upward spiral of activity, achievement and self-esteem (Jerrome, 1984). Spencer and Pahl's (2006: 210) study of friendships in the UK suggests that 'friendship can act [not only] as a vital safety-net providing much needed support and intimacy, but also as a safety-valve enabling people to relax and cope with pressures of contemporary life'. Thirdly, friendship facilitates social integration. On the one hand, through friendships individuals are able to be connected to wider social networks. As early as in the 18th century, social theorists have put forward the argument that friendships in modern commercial societies help to integrate individuals into the larger society (Silver 1990). On the other hand, as argued in the last section, friendships between women serve to strengthen marriage bonds. Thus, friendships serve as the 'cement which binds together the bricks of social structure' (Jerrome, 1984: 715).

2.3 The Internet and Empowerment

The origin of the Internet can be traced to the US Defence Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). Based on an idea of designing a communication system that can survive nuclear attack, the first network – ARPANET went online in 1969 (Castells, 1996; 2001). This network does not have a command and control centre. Messages created at any point can be transmitted to other points of the network. Once some points of this network are destroyed, the remaining can continue working. Although ARPANET was sponsored by US Defence Department, scientists used it for all sorts of communication purposes. In the 1980s, ARPANET became a dedicated communication network for scientific purposes and other networks also started developing. The network of these various networks formed the Internet (Castells, 1996). However, only after 1993 did the Internet take off when web-browsers such as Mosaic and Netscape were widely available and made Internet communication easy to use (Dochartaigh, 2002). With the widespread use of the Internet, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has become popular and created a new space – cyberspace, which means 'the space of interaction formed by the global network of computers which compose the internet' (Giddens, 2001: 471).

Because it is able to transcend time and space and it is a decentred system, the Internet has been suggested to have an empowering potential and be able to liberate its users from certain constraints. This section will review a number of empirical studies and theoretical debates about Internet use and its enabling capacity.

2.3.1 Maintaining and Expanding Social Networks

Like other modern technologies, such as train, airplane, telegraph, and telephone, the Internet helps to overcome the spatial constraint. With the Internet, people are able to keep in touch with their contacts no matter how far away they are from each other through emails, MSN, and other forms of CMC. According to the two Internet user surveys in the USA, potential social interaction is the major motivation of using the Internet, and half of those Americans surveyed regarded email as a good reason for having Internet service (Katz and Rice, 2002).

Apart from helping its users to keep in touch with their old friends, the Internet has also been regarded to enable its users to construct online communities in cyberspace and to 'meet' and know new people and potential friends across the whole globe. When some sociologists are warning that communities are collapsing and that social capital is declining in western societies (e.g. Putnam, 1995; 2000), the possibility of constructing community and developing personal relationships online seems encouraging. It is Rheingold (1993: 5) who popularised the concept of 'virtual community' which 'are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace'. However, whether online communities are worth the name 'community' or not has been hotly debated. Next, I shall examine the two opposite positions in turn.

Criticisms of virtual community

German theorist Ferdinand Tonnies (1887/2001) first put forward the theory of community (*gemeinschaft*). The primary level of community – 'community of blood' – developed into 'community of place', which in turn further expanded into 'community of spirit'. The central theme of community is mutuality: mutual

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understanding, mutual possession, and mutual enjoyment. Community stands in contrast with society (*gesellschaft*), where *individualism* thrives, one's possession and enjoyment being to the exclusion of the others. Community entails physical proximity, based on which shared history, language, value system, and religion develops naturally. Thus, for Tonnies, community is both community of place and community of relationship, and without the former the latter cannot develop. Not surprisingly, the critiques of 'virtual community' are centred on place and relationship.

In a physical community, an individual is embedded in a geographic place where a cause-effect relationship exists. Individuals in cyberspace however are dispersed in various geographic places. The cause-effect relationships online are unlikely to be transferred into physical places. Moreover, according to Jones (1999), there are so many virtual communities that one can easily choose to join another community if he/she does not like the present one. Kolko and Reid (1998) thus argue that online space is displaced and dispersed and the 'spatial accountability' is missing. Without spatial consequences, according to Kolko and Reid, people pursue self-interest without reconciliation with others, and to quit or 'log out' is the way of solving conflicts. It seems unjustified to say that there is a lack of spatial consequence in cyberspace: to quit from an online space individuals will lose what they own in that space. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that it is much easier to quit from an online space that to do so from a physical community.

The numerous choices in dispersed online space give people great freedom to choose which community to join (Foster, 1997; Healy, 1997). For this reason and drawing upon Bellah *et al.*'s work (1985/1996), Healy (1997) argues that virtual community is more like 'lifestyle enclaves' than real community. According to him, community should be all-inclusive and accommodate differences. Virtual communities, however, are formed around narrowly specified interests and differences are excluded. They consist of like-minded people who indulge themselves in the narcissism of similarity. Thus, to Healy virtual communities are similar to 'life enclaves', where people from similar social, economical, and cultural situations join together to share similar leisure and consumption choices. This opinion is echoed by Lockard (1997), who argues that Rheingold *et al.*'s naming virtual spaces as communities is self-deceptive and out of imagination. According to him, these virtual communities are commercial tools,

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which are used to facilitate 'technological acceptance, integration, familiarity, and consumption' (p.224). For example, virtual communities can be used to discuss life style and fashion trend, and by doing so consumption is boosted. The interactions online between participants and members, however, are fleeting and ephemeral, rather than meaningful. In a similar vein, Fernback (2004) argues that virtual communities are commodities. It is free to join the virtual community, as a result of which commercial advertisements have to be allowed.

From a psychological perspective, Foster (1997: 25) succinctly states that community 'embodies a set of voluntary, social, and reciprocal relations that are bound together by an immutable "we-feeling"'. The narrow bandwidth of CMC and thus the limited social presence online, according to him, are detrimental to the formation of 'we-feeling'. What members of virtual communities hold in common is most probably narrowly specialised interest rather than anything else. People sitting alone in front of a computer screen choose from the numerous choices provided by the Internet and focus on a specific and narrow field of interest. By doing so, Foster argues, they may cocoon themselves in self-interest and lose sight of the diversity of the world and others. In such situation, people tend to ignore the differences and attribute their image of the self to the others (Foster, 1997), and 'focus on themselves in the presence of the [disembodied] others' (Putnam, 1995). Thus, the sense of 'we-feeling' in virtual communities, according to Foster (1997), is artificial and distorted.

In brief, the virtual environment is seen by virtual community sceptics to foster individualism and encourages pursuit of self-interest. For them, the 'we-feeling' and 'mutuality' are hard to achieve in virtual communities.

Supports of virtual community

For those who follow Tonnies' (1887/2001) traditional view, shared territory is a prerequisite for community, without which, shared sentiments are an illusion (Foster, 1997; Lockard, 1997). However, Anderson (1983) argues that any community beyond face-to-face interaction is imagined and exists in the participants' minds. Cohen (1985) points out that community is symbolically constructed which has its particular value system providing meaning and a sense of identity to its members. According to him, instead of shared place, meaning and the sense of identity that its members share

determine the existence of the community. Based on these arguments, Fernback (1999) suggests that virtual communities are those of meaning rather than place. For her, as long as participants attribute meaning to it, conceive it as community, and form relationships here, virtual community deserves the name of community. In an ethnographic study of an opera fan virtual community, Baym (1995a; 1998) noted that specific social meanings emerged in this community, in the forms of unique online expression (for example, emoticons), online identities, online relationships, and behavioural norms. Thus, Baym argued that this can be regarded as a community.

Another branch of community study focuses on network analysis. Webber (1973) has noted that modern communication and transportation technology enables community members to maintain intimate relationships over long distances. Thus communities can be based on beliefs and interests rather than shared territories. Building upon this, network analysts have developed another method to study communities which stresses structures. They suggest that a community is a personal community – a network of ties, rather than a village-like territory that contains various relationships (Wellman, 1982). Neighbourhood and kinship ties are only part of people's community networks since modern transportation and communication system help them to maintain long distance ties (Wellman, 1997; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). Network analysts differentiate communities into two ideal types. One is densely knit and tightly bound village-like community, where members live proximately and everyone maintains relationships with the others. The other is sparsely knit and unbound communities, where one person maintains relationships with distant, separate and probably unrelated others (Wellman, 1997). Thus network analysts shift the focus of community study from analysis of norms and solidarity formed by common physical place to analysis of various ties (Wellman, 1982). The tie has strength, which is determined by time, emotional intensity, mutual disclosure, and reciprocity (Granovetter, 1973). Ties are usually differentiated into strong ties and weak ties. People who have strong ties share many resources and rely on each other, such as close friends; and people who have weak ties share fewer resources and rely less on each other, such as acquaintances (Granovetter, 1982).

Taking a network analysts' point of view, Wellman and Gulia (1999) argue that 'net surfers don't ride alone'. Online relationships can be mutually and emotionally

supportive, and provide companionship (e.g. Baym, 1998; Rheingold, 1993). Meanwhile helping others online can increase self-esteem and achieve a sense of status attainment. Moreover, the cost of providing online support is quite low (Kollock, 1999; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). These facilitate online generalised reciprocity. Thus, in Wellman and Gulia's (1999) opinion, online ties can be strong, intimate and reciprocal. Though most online communities are organised by shared interest and the relationships exist only in a narrowly specialised area, according to Wellman and Gulia (1999), these relationships can be seen as 'intimate secondary relationships': intimate and supportive communities ties that operate only in one specialised domain (Wireman, 1984). Furthermore, weak ties are very easy to form in cyberspace. People are willing to communicate with strangers online, while in real life very few are willing to do that. The lack of social status and physical cues further encourage people to develop weak ties with a wide variety of people (Wellman and Gulia, 1999). Thus, the ties developed in virtual communities are periodic, specialised, and different in strength. However, in real life, people's ties are also very much like that. They depend on different ties to acquire different resources. In this sense, Wellman and Gulia (1999) argue that virtual communities can be comparable to physical communities.

Clearly, both sides – critics and supporters – have their points. One focuses on the downside of online communities, while the other on the good side of it. Their arguments are based on different concepts of 'community': one is the traditional place bounded *gemeinschaft*; and the other assumes that community is the sum of meaningful relationships. It is clear that online communities are not traditional *gemeinschaft* in Tonnies' sense, since unlike relationships in *gemeinschaft* which perhaps persist over a life-time, those developed online may not last long and only revolve around one special common interest. However, there is an abundance of evidence showing that, like members of a traditional community, participants in cyberspace are also able to share their problems and joys and to provide each other with help and company. Next, let us see some such examples.

Social support online

Research about online support groups provides the most visible examples (e.g. Burrows *et al.*, 2000; King, 1994; Lieberman and Russo, 2001; Miller and Gergen,

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1998; Orgad, 2004a; 2004b; Pitts, 2004; Salem *et al.*, 1997; Sharf, 1997). Such online groups are normally characterised by supportive and positive environment (e.g. Salem, 1997). Participants provide each other with valuable resources, such as validation of experiences, sympathy, acceptance, and encouragement (e.g. Miller and Gergen, 1998). Such mutual help and support have a therapeutic value which may promote participants' well-being (King, 1994; Miller and Gergen, 1998). In these groups, there normally exists a sense of mutual attachment and solidarity. For example, Orgad (2005) noticed that there is a feeling of bonding and sisterhood in breast cancer groups; and similarly, King (1994) perceived a sense of belonging in online support groups for recovering addicts. Thus, for participants, those groups can be community-like social networks, where they share their ups and downs and support each other to tide over difficult times.

We should notice that such kinds of networks may not be possible offline. For example, Orgad (2005) noted that breast cancer patients have difficulties to reach other fellow sufferers offline to share their experiences for reasons, such as physical distances, and states of physical and emotional weakness. In this context, online communication, according to Orgad (2005) and Pitts (2004), helps breast cancer patients to overcome their feeling of isolation and alienation and binds them together. The social networks established by breast cancer patients online, Radin (2006) argues, form a kind of social capital, which helps patients to overcome the sense of insecurity and uncertainty when their lives are threatened and disrupted by the breast cancer.

Certainly, online support exists not only in mutual support groups, but also in other kinds of online groups. Rheingold's (1993) account of activities in the online space of WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), for example, shows that those participants care about each other and are willing to offer each other both emotional and material help. Baym's (1998) study of an online soap opera fan community also shows that those fans are able to provide each other with emotional comfort. In fact, many observers point out that in cyberspace, people are more altruistic than they are offline (e.g. Kollock, 1999; Rheingold, 1993); and many argue that online economy is gift economy (Barbrook, 1999; 2000; Raymond, 2000); and that everything is free. In these cyber social networks, participants appear to be able to form meaningful relationships, to which I shall turn now.

Online relationships

Earlier commentators taking Short *et al.*'s (1976) social presence perspective hold that the narrow bandwidth of online communications filters out social, relational and nonverbal cues which are important in face-to-face interactions and development of relationships (Sproull and Keisler, 1991). Thus, they claim that online communications are impersonal; that people show less empathy and concerns for others on the Internet; and that intimate relationships are unlikely to emerge online.

These earlier theories on online relationships have been argued against by later commentators. Lea and Spears (1995) developed the social identification/deindividuation (SIDE) model. Following social identity tradition which suggests that an individual has personal identities, social identities (such as a member of a social group), and social categorisations in society (such as gender), Lea and Spears differentiate social attraction and personal attraction. Social attraction emerges between people who have the same social identity, and personal attraction results from personal qualities. In online communications, lack of physical cues increases the salience of social identities. Moreover, identification with one group can be easily done by choosing and joining discussion groups. If social identity is valued, then the feelings of liking one particular other are more likely to emerge since this particular other is seen as the prototypical of the group. Thus, Lea and Spears argue that online communication may facilitate the formation of friendships.

The SIDE model only focuses on receivers, which is partial. Walter's (1996) information processing perspective takes both senders and receivers into account. According to Walter, because physical cues are filtered out, the senders can be selective in self presentations and edit the messages they send out in favour of themselves; the receivers on the other side construct idealised images of their partners and their relationships based on the received stylised messages, and through further reciprocation, confirm them. Through this process, 'hyper-personal relationships' are likely to form. However, the process takes longer time, since information can only be transmitted through limited channels (see also, Walter, 1992; Walter *et al.*, 1994). Thus, it takes longer to form intimate relationships online than it does offline.

Whereas the SIDE model and information processing perspective are based on experiment data, Parks and Floyds (1996) did the first empirical study on online friendships. They randomly sampled 24 newsgroups and 22 participants from each group. Of 528 prospective participants, 176 (33.3%) responded to their Email survey questionnaire. Nearly two third of these respondents reported to have developed a personal relationship with someone just met online. According to their study, half of these relationships could be termed as intimate. They also found that the longer and the more frequently one had contributed to newsgroups, the more likely he/she had developed a personal relationship online, and that women were more likely than men to form online relationships.

Several ethnographic studies of online communities have also been done more recently (e.g. Baym, 2000; Carter, 2005; Kendall, 2002; Williams, 2003). In these studies, accounts of intimate relationships are very common. Carter's (2005) study of Cybercity – a virtual community shows that making friends online is more proactive than reactive. This is because people online are more willing to initiate a chat with strangers than they are offline. Anonymity makes people feel safe for self-disclosure. In the processing of making friends, people are less concerned about others' race, age, appearance, and other physical features. As a result, Carter's informants reported that online friendships 'tend to be more emotional and psychological since you cannot see the person's physical characteristics' and 'in a more personal way' than their offline ones (p.160). Intimacy of online friendships for some participants, according to Carter, seems to be superior to their offline friendships. Thus, it seems that given enough time, intimate relationships can thrive in the online environment.

Quite often, online friendships are moved into the offline world. WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) holds a summer picnic for its members every year in San Francisco (Rheingold, 1993). In King's (1994) study of an online support group for addicts in recovery, 58 percent of his respondents made contact with other members by phone, mail, or face-to-face. Parks and Floyd (1996) found that 35.3 percent of their respondents used the telephone, 28.4 percent used mail, and 33.3 percent moved their online relationships into face-to-face interaction. In Baym's (1998) study of one online discussion group, she found that the members often arranged local gatherings or meetings. Kendall's (2002) study of 'BlueSky' online community, Carter's (2005)

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study of Cybercity, and Liu's (2005) study of 'Tianya' virtual community have also reported occasions of shifting online friendships offline.

In all, past research shows that many online communities are able to provide meaningful and useful social networks. In the latter, participants are likely to offer each other support and to establish personal relationships; they also spend time together, socialise with and entertain each other (Kendall, 2002; Liu, 2005). Many participants also appear to feel a sense of belonging towards their cyber communities (King, 1994; Liu, 2005). Given these features, it seems justifiable to say that these online networks are a kind of community though we should not lose sight that members of such communities may not stay long and they may only show one part of their lives online. We should also notice that some virtual communities do not function well (e.g. Foster, 1997; Kolko and Reid, 1998), and in those supportive online communities not all participants have meaningful online relationships, for example, Williams' (2003) study suggests that while online relationships may be intimate for 'long-timers', for 'newbies' they may be fleeting and recreational. Thus, it seems that the question whether virtual community exists or not should be changed to whether one specific online group is a community or not, and for whom it is regarded as a community.

So far, it seems safe to say that the Internet has empowered many people in the sense that it enables them to construct valuable social networks and establish meaningful relationships. Such networks are able to offer important resources for people to tide over difficult times. They may not, however, be available offline. In a qualitative study of everyday use of the Internet in Vancouver, Bakardjieva and Smith (2001) interviewed a self-elected sample consisting of 29 respondents and a large proportion of them were immigrants. They identified four key reasons for the Internet use:

1) The ability to join dispersed communities formed by those in similar situation
2) Overcoming isolation due to illness, family situation, or unemployment, and dislocations due to moving
3) Maintaining contact with dispersed social networks
4) The current job is lacking in challenge, boring, or unsatisfactory

The first three items indicated that the Internet enabled the informants to overcome spatial constraints and to maintain and have access to wider social networks, while the

last one showed that the Internet played the role of entertaining. Before moving to the next section, I shall examine the interplay between the online and the offline.

The relationship between the online and the offline

In 1998, Kraut *et al.* (1998) proposed the famous 'Internet Paradox' theory based on their HomeNet study which involved 93 families with 256 family members. This theory suggests that Internet use displaced social activities and strong social ties. The time Internet users spend online squeezes or displaces offline life, and contacts and interactions with their neighbours and local communities, leading to the declining of social capital. As a result, the Internet serves to separate people from physical social relations. Of course, this theory is not without controversy (see for example, Shapiro, 1999; Shaw and Gant, 2002). In a similar vein, Calhoun (1998: 389) argues that the Internet as well as other modern communication technologies results in the 'compartmentalisation of community life' which 'is antithetical to the social constitution of a vital public sphere'.

The basic assumption of such criticism seems to be that Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and face-to-face interaction are rivals, and that engaging one is always at the cost at the other. This assumption may be flawed. One may squeeze other time such as watching TV time rather than face-to-face interaction time to engage in CMC. The existent evidence suggests to Putnam (2000) that CMC will complement rather than replace people's connections in the offline world. Having reviewed a large body of literature on the social impact of Internet use, Castells (2001: 124) concludes that 'the body of evidence does not support the thesis that Internet use leads to lower social interaction and greater social isolation'.

Based on 1995 (n=2500) and 2000 (n=1800) Internet user surveys in the USA, and Pew Internet and American Life project survey, Katz and Rice (2002: 264) pointed out that '[t]here are many statistically significant, if not very strong, relationships between being an Internet user (and a longer-term Internet user) and greater offline as well as online social interactions'. The 1995 survey showed that Internet users were more likely to have met with friends in the past week. The 2000 survey indicated that Internet users average had a stronger sense of belonging to a social group, and spent less time watching TV and more time listening to radio, and 85 percent of them

expressed a positive view on the Internet. The Pew data suggests that Internet users had more friends to rely on for support, and tended to visit friends and family more often.

World Internet Project China 2003 survey yielded a similar result (Guo, 2003). This large scale survey (including 2,457 internet users and 1,484 non-users) was conducted in 12 cities in China. According to this survey, non-users spent much longer time watching TV and a bit longer time reading newspapers than users, while users spent much longer time reading books and listening to music, and a bit longer time reading magazines and watching videos than non-users. The users themselves reported that they reduced the time spent in other traditional media such as radio, TV, newspaper, and magazines. This survey suggests that the use of the Internet did not reduce face-to-face interaction. With regard to the number of friends (family members were excluded) that one met at least once per week, users average had 6, while non-users had 4.78; more social active users (having more than 100 people in their communication lists) average had 8, while more social active non-users had 7.4. Moreover, 63 per cent of user respondents reported that the use of the Internet increased the number of friends whom they contacted frequently. Thus, the online and the offline appear to be complementing, rather than replacing, each other. In most cases, Internet use may serve to connect people, while in extreme cases, such as Internet addiction, Internet use may result in social isolation.

2.3.2 Acquiring and Distributing Information

On April 23 of 2007, *Google* was ranked as the most powerful brand in the world by the WPP Brand Equity Study. *Google* is a famous Internet tool for searching information online. Its success to a certain extent indicates that the Internet has become an important source for information in the contemporary world. Being a global network, it contains a large amount of information that covers a wide range of topics and is easily retrievable. Gaining access to it means some necessary information is just 'a click away'.

Acquiring information online

According to Giddens' (1990; 1991) social theory, abstract systems, such as symbolic tokens (money, for example) and expert systems, have penetrated deeply into our everyday social life. Our daily lives depend very much on those systems. Probably very few people nowadays have the necessary knowledge and skills to live an independent life, no matter how simple the life is. For example, hardly any of us can weave cloth to cover ourselves. In a sense, we are deskilled and disempowered by systems. However, we are also aware that expert systems have limitations and that there is no definite authority in expert systems, since experts disagree with each other quite often and knowledge is always subject to revision (Giddens, 1990). Experts also compete with each other. For example, when one expert offers a good service, many others may promise better ones. Furthermore, those systems may fail us and leave us in a quagmire. Therefore, we need to exert our agency and empower ourselves in order to gain some control of our lives; and at crossroads, we do our best to find out all possibilities and choices and seek information by all means in order to make informed decisions. In this context, the Internet has been regarded to be a powerful tool in terms of providing information to reskill and empower ordinary people.

Mele (1999) recounted an optimistic story that disadvantaged groups used the Internet as a tool to seek information. In a downtown redevelopment program, the residents, all African-American women, due to their limited technical knowledge, could not have an equal say with the housing authority. This encouraged them to go online to seek information and technical support from professionals. By doing so, they gained enough knowledge to negotiate effectively with the housing authority.

Empirical studies on 'E-health' suggest that health information online empowers patients to gain medical knowledge (e.g. Hardey, 1999; 2001; 2002b; Kivits, 2004; Nettleton *et al.*, 2004; Pitts, 2004). According to Hardey (2001), the large amount of health information available online has transformed some patients into health knowledge consumers. The latter employ this acquired knowledge not only to make informed decisions (Sharf, 1997), but also to level the hierarchal relationship between patients and medical professionals (Hardey, 2001; Pitts, 2004). Pitts (2004) notes that some cancer patients and their family members are able to use online information to make sense of medical jargon and thereby demystify medical discourse. Hardey (2001)

and Nettleton *et al.* (2004) have observed that patients can now utilise health information acquired from the Internet to negotiate treatments with doctors. Thus, Hardey (1999; 2001) argues that the traditional doctor/patient relationship is under transformation; and that doctors and other health professionals' monopoly over medical knowledge has been challenged, though patients still primarily depend on professionals for health care.

Producing discourse and distributing information online

Apart from searching for information, people also produce discourse and distribute information online. The decentralised nature of the Internet, according to some commentators, put the apparatus of cultural production, such as speech, publishing, radio and television, in the hands of all participants. Instead of passive reading, the Internet encourages people to actively participate – writing and creating their own discourse (Tabbi, 1997). The acts of online discourse thus are two-ways, rather than one directional. These features made Poster (1997) view the Internet as a new form of public sphere where central authority is challenged. Kedzie (1997) is more optimistic and announces that the Internet will help to foster global democracy.

Empirical studies on 'E-health' also suggest that in addition to being consumers, patients have become 'producers' of health knowledge with the aid of the Internet (Hardy, 2001; 2002b). It is quite common that patients tell their personal stories and share their illness experiences online. By telling their personal stories, patients make sense of their illness (Hardy, 2002b). It is not unusual that patients are both consumers and producers of health knowledge, especially in mutual-help online groups (Lieberman and Russo, 2001; Salem *et al.*, 1997). Orgad (2004a; 2004b) studied breast cancer patients' usage of the Internet. According to her, breast cancer threatens patients' ontological security and disrupts the continuity of self-identity. By sharing illness experiences and knowledge gained from these experiences, patients empower themselves to manage the threat and disruption that the cancer poses to their routine everyday lives.

Distributing information through the Internet can be very efficient because of its global coverage and speed. This may help to organise large scale social events. Gurak (1999), for example, recorded two cases of social protests organised through

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distributing messages online. One was a protest over Market-Place, a marketing database that contained the names, addresses, and spending-habit information of 120 million American consumers. Privacy advocates felt that this violated the right for privacy. They circulated messages through the Internet advising people to contact Lotus (the company that developed Market-Place) to make them delete their personal information. As a result, Market-Place was never released. The other was a protest over Clipper chip (an encryption chip). In the 1990s, in America the Clinton administration proposed that all encrypted messages should be de-encrypted by the government for security purpose. Privacy and free speech advocates did not agree and they organised an online petition. Forty seven thousand signatures were generated and the government proposal was defeated.

The digital divide

In *Critique of Information*, Lash (2002) argues that in the information age, power operates through exclusion: copyright and intellectual property are protected by law and non-owners are excluded from using them. Perhaps, the powerless is also excluded from gaining access to information. Thus, the 'digital divide' is discussed quite often (DiMaggio *et al.*, 2001; Katz and Rice, 2002). After all, most Internet users are white and middle-class young people (Jordan, 2001; Lockard, 1997; Poster, 1997).

As the creator of the Internet, the USA owns the majority of the intellectual properties of the Internet and controls most of the Internet resources. Other countries must pay the USA a large amount of patent fees when constructing and running the Internet (Wei, 2005). Under Internet Protocol version 4 (IPv4)[3], the USA owns 70 percent of IP address, and the total number of IP addresses allocated to China is equal to that allocated to one university in the USA (He, 2005). In 2000, 91 percent of Internet hosts were owned by North America and Europe. The USA alone had 65 percent

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[3] The most widely used version of the Internet Protocol. IPv4 allows for a theoretical maximum of approximately four billion *IP Numbers* (technically 2^{32}), but the actual number is far less due to inefficiencies in the way blocks of numbers are handled by networks. The gradual adoption of *IPv6* will solve this problem. [from http://www.matisse.net/files/glossary.html]

(Jordan, 2000). In early 1998, 78.7 percent of Internet hosts were from English speaking countries. By early 2000, this figure had grown to 80.3 percent (Jordan, 2000). From Figure 2.1 below which presents a table on World Internet Usage and Population Statistics, it can be seen that the inequality between regions is obviously significant.

Figure 2.1 World Internet Usage and Population Statistics 2005

World Regions	Population (2005 Est.)	Population % of World	Internet Usage, Latest Data	Penetration % Population	World Users %
Africa	900,465,411	14.0 %	13,468,600	1.5 %	1.5 %
Asia	3,612,363,165	56.3 %	302,257,003	8.4 %	34.0 %
Europe	730,991,138	11.4 %	259,653,144	35.5 %	29.2 %
Middle East	259,499,772	4.0 %	19,370,700	7.5 %	2.2 %
North America	328,387,059	5.1 %	221,437,647	67.4 %	24.9 %
Latin America	546,917,192	8.5 %	56,224,957	10.3 %	6.3 %
Oceania / Australia	33,443,448	0.5 %	16,269,080	48.6 %	1.8 %
WORLD TOTAL	6,412,067,185	100.0 %	888,681,131	13.9 %	100.0 %

(Source: Internet World Stats, 2005)

The inequality is also significant within the nation state. By the end of 2004, although there were 94 million Internet users in China (China defines Internet users as those who spend average more than one hour per week on the Internet), the second largest user population in the world, only 7.2 percent of Chinese can actually be identified as Internet users (CNNIC, 2005). Figure 2.2 below which presents the Age Distribution of Chinese Internet Users shows that most of Chinese users are young, only 11.6 percent of them are aged above forty years old. The most visible divide in China is along the urban/rural split. In early 2003, it was estimated that only 600,000 of 60 million Chinese Internet users lived in rural areas, though 62 percent of China's population are actually classified as rural residents (Harwit, 2004).

Figure 2.2 Age Distribution of Chinese Internet Users

18 -	18-24	25-30	31-35	36-40	41-50	51-60	60+
16.4%	35.3%	17.7%	11.4%	7.6%	7.6%	2.9%	1.1%

(Source: China Internet Network Information Centre, 2005)

The 'digital divide' in China is certainly huge. However, we should not lose sight of the large growth rate of Internet users in the last decade or so. From October of 1997, the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) has carried out surveys of Internet users to produce statistics every half year. Figure 2.3 below shows the outcomes of these statistics. Some seven years later, by October of 1997, there were only 620 thousand Internet users. By the end of 2004, the figure had reached 94 million, 151.6 times of that of 1997 figure!

Figure 2.3 Number (*10,000) of Internet Users in China from 1997 to 2004
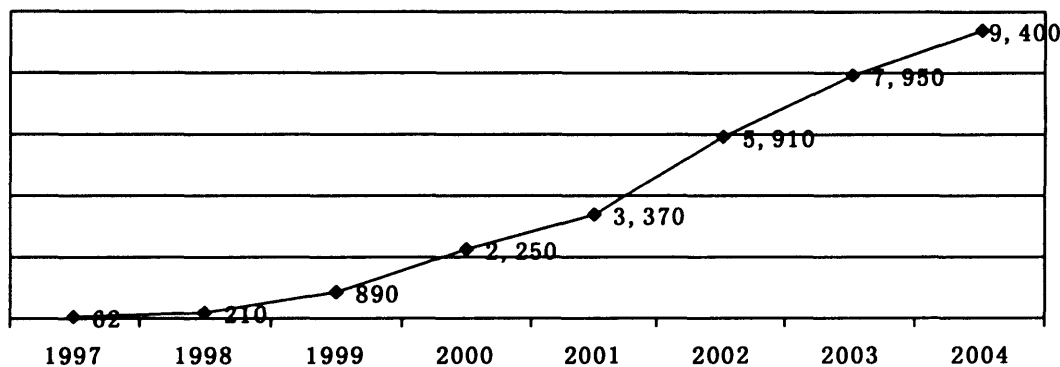
(Source: China Internet Network Information Centre, 2005)

In brief, the development of the Internet in China has provided the technical support to establish the communication platform – the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* which set up the stage for seafarers and their partners to voice their many concerns, acquire information, and communicate with each other. However, it is also clear from an analysis of the User Database of this website that most users registered themselves as aged below 30 years. The age profile of users suggests that the user population is relatively young.

2.3.3 Identity Construction

Cyberspace is a disembodied space and it can be anonymous. Most forms of CMC, such as BBS, Newsgroups, and Multi-User Domains (MUDs), are conducted through text. The identities of users are text-constructed as well. On the Internet, users' identities can be whatever they like to type. In a well-known and very humorous New

Yorker cartoon, one dog being engaged in CMC points out this incisively, 'On the Internet no one knows you're a dog'. Danet (1998) states that the Internet provides a place for masquerade and that the typed text provides masks. Thus, both Danet (1998) and Turkle (1995) claim that virtual culture is 'a culture of simulation', where people may 'craft' their identities freely.

Postmodernists state that identity is multiple and the self is a discourse rather than a real thing (Turkle, 1995). Since identities can be text-constructed masks in cyberspace, one can construct several masks for the online self in one masquerade or several masquerades. This seems to provide postmodernists with supportive evidence. According to Turkle (1995: 14), 'windows have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple, distributed system'. In real life, one can only take different identities at different time and different places. However, one can take and perform several identities online, just as one can operate across several windows, at the same time and even the same space. For example, one can open four windows of the same chat-room on one screen and assume four identities talking to one or several others simultaneously. Thus, postmodernists argue that the self in cyberspace is decentred, discrete, and a series of unrelated episodes (Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1995).

The Internet, postmodernists also believe, has an empowering and emancipatory potential in that it would enable its users to realise that identity is a cultural production and thus can be deconstructed. Stone (1996) envisages that technology, including the Internet, as opening the gate to the virtual age, where one finds the self floating in a sea of possible identities rather than being anchored to a fixed point. In the virtual age, the virtual and the real will implode – one takes the virtual experiences, which in Stone's sense are free of cultural constraints, as real and thus transforms the real. Following Foucault (1991), Stone argues that fixing one's identity with the physical body is for the purpose of social discipline and order, which can be suffocating sometimes. Similarly, Turkle (1995) suggests that the experiences of constructing fluid online identities make visible for individuals the cultural process of offline identity production and thus help them to deconstruct it. In these authors' views, by making people aware that the self is fragmented and incoherent instead of unified, the Internet is able to set them free of cultural chains and liberate them from the constraints of embodiment.

However, the claim of postmodernists alike has been criticised for their exaggeration of the separation between the online and the offline (Hine, 2000; Kendall, 1999; Miller and Slater, 2000). Postmodernists' theories on the Internet start from the assumption that the online world is independent of the offline and overplay the disembeddedness of the online social interactions. This assumption leads postmodernists to over-generalise the phenomenon of identity performance online. Later studies note that the online and the offline are not separable; and that most people use the Internet to solve the offline problems rather than play different identities. Such studies also indicate that online identities of those under research tend to be a continuation of their offline ones (e.g. Baym, 1998; Fox and Roberts, 1999; Hardey, 2002a). For example, Kendall's (1998; 2002) study of an online community showed that instead of deconstructing culturally produced identities members re-enacted and brought their offline masculinity, class, and race roles online. As a result, Castells (2001) observed that only a small number of people, and most likely, teenagers, engaged in role-playing and multiple identity construction online; and that for the majority of the Internet users, online activities were an extension of, and closely related to, their offline lives. Therefore, although it is true that some people explore new identities online, this does not dominate the social use of the Internet.

Furthermore, it also seems that Stone and Turtle's claims over-stated the effect of identity performance online. In the online community that Kendall (1998; 2002) studied, some members switched genders online. However, as Kendall noted, these members did not take online gender switching experiences serious offline at all. For them, the online play did not affect their fixed offline identity; and they never regarded offline identity as fluid.

Though there is hardly any evidence showing that the Internet helps to deconstruct gender, race, and other culturally constructed identities, past research does indicate that identity construction online can be empowering and liberating, but from a different perspective.

The Internet, to a certain extent, allows people to show their suppressed or stigmatised identities online. In everyday life people have to present themselves as expected by

social norms according to their roles (Goffman, 1969). In cyberspace, however, the anonymity and the invisibility of the physical self free people from politically and socially imposed roles. Online, they can explore different and/or unexplored aspects of their personalities that are prohibited to present in the offline life. Thus it is argued that people can take on and perform the roles online that are unavailable, too taboo, too dangerous, too embarrassing, marginalised, or stigmatised in real life. Slater's (1998; see also Rival *et al.*, 1999) study of a sex picture trading website show that the Internet provides a channel for people to pursue embarrassing sexual fantasies. Chandler's (1997; 1998) study of personal home-pages suggest that gay people are able to present their gay identity online without feeling stigmatised. Furthermore, Cheung (2004) argues that cyberspace allows those physically handicapped and shy people to present themselves online without feeling embarrassed and marginalised, since online presentation is disembodied.

The opportunity for marginalised, stigmatised and traumatised groups to present their identities online helps to normalise and (re)establish a positive identity (Cheung, 2004). Gay informants in Chandler's (1997; 1998) study reported that to present their gay identity online made it easier for them to come out in their offline lives. Research about breast cancer patients' online communication suggests that online activities helped patients to make sense of and normalise their painful experiences, to put their traumatised identity in a positive light, and to regain the control of the disrupted life (Orgad, 2004a; 2004b; Pitts, 2004).

In this respect, identity construction online is empowering and liberating. It empowers marginalised and stigmatised groups to present their identities with little negative consequences. In a sense, it liberates those people from suppressive social order, and makes it possible for them to gain the control over and shed positive light on the stigmatised identity.

Summary

In this chapter, we have reviewed and discussed three sets of relevant literature: love and intimacy, friendship, and Internet use and empowerment. The first body of literature shows that in the contemporary society individuals are more likely to exert

their freedom in choosing sexual and marriage partners, yet the freedom of choices gives rise to the freedom of break-up and divorce. As a result, several theorists argue that modern intimate relationships are precarious and fragile. In this context, and bearing in mind SPs' predicaments mentioned in the last chapter, it is not unreasonable to assume that the relationship between a seafaring couple is very vulnerable. The literature on friendship, however, suggests that friends and the social network constituted by friends may serve to consolidate marriage and family cohesion. The last part of literature reviewed in this chapter reveals that the Internet can help its users to construct supportive social networks across time and space, to acquire and transfer information and knowledge, and to validate and normalise self-experiences.

Chapter 3 Doing the Research Online and Offline

This chapter details the research process and provides a reflexive account of my experience in the research field. The fast development of Internet technology and the rapid growth of the number of Internet users have made various online research methods possible. The mushrooming of the virtual communities in its turn has formed new spaces for social inquiries. New research methods and new research fields certainly raise new methodological questions. The first section will address some general epistemological and methodological issues regarding doing research online. Section two describes the process of online observation, the challenges encountered, and the ups and downs experienced. It also shows the effort and activities of crafting relationships with participants. Besides participant observation, semi-structured interviewing was also employed in the research. Due to the nature of this research, however, many challenges were encountered in the process of both recruiting informants and doing interviews, which will be explained in the third section. Meanwhile, section three also compares face-to-face interviews and email ones and suggests the pros and cons of each method. The fourth section gives a brief account of translating and analysing data, while the last section considers ethical issues.

3.1 Methodological implications of doing online research

In cyberspace, participants may not be able to use facial expression, body language, physical action or voice to interact with each other. They mainly depend on text and other symbols to convey their intended meanings. This textual feature led Fox and Roberts (1999: 650) to argue that:

> If in traditional ethnography there is ambiguity over the validity of participants' representation of a setting and the subsequent construction of ethnographic text as a second level representation of these representation (Tyler, 1986; Armstrong *et al.*, 1997), in the study of a text-based 'virtual community' this ambiguity is total: there is no fixed point against which an ethnographic account might be measured, as there is no underpinning 'reality' upon which participants' representation might be based: the 'community' exists only in people's heads. In a nutshell, there is only ever representation, and that representation is totally divorced from only 'reality' there is, namely the passage of electrical charges through computer circuits.

Fox and Roberts made this argument as if a physical community and its culture were not conceptions but physical objects, which could be seen, touched, and as a ruler against which representation of it could be actually measured. This is an obviously flawed depiction. Community and culture are abstract conceptions. They are not 'out there' independently and detached, but manifest themselves implicitly in everyday social life (Atkinson *et al.*, 2003; Van Maanen, 1988). In a specific physical environment, social life is conducted through physical and/or symbolic actions, whereas in text environments, it is conducted and created through the text itself. Moreover, to say that the only 'reality' of a virtual community is electrical charges is to say that the only 'reality' of physical communities is atoms. This is not to say that electrical charges and atoms are not realities. But they are not the *only* realities. Certainly, neither relationships nor cultures developed in virtual communities are mere electrical charges. They are as real as those in physical communities, just as electrical charges are as real as atoms. Thus, in this respect, virtual communities have no difference from physical ones; they have a similar form of ontological reality.

Text in the online space also has the same epistemological status as various forms of social actions in the offline world. It is not simply for others to read in online spaces. It is produced as a result of the actions of its authors. In Goffman's (1969) sense, such actions are a performance. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman argues in everyday life people engage in performances to create a 'personal front' that is appropriate to the situation. In the current study, the texts on the website are part of 'everyday life'. In traditional research fields, the performance of the researched consists of verbal and non-verbal actions. In other words, they materialise their performance by means of actions and words. In this way, social actors make or expect to make themselves understood; and through interpreting others' actions, they make sense of the performance of others. The task of the field researcher is to collect, make sense of, interpret, and represent their performances (in forms of acts and words). It is in the performance that a culture is embodied. Through the researcher's representation, culture or cultures are made visible. In online spaces, all forms of individual action collapse into one – symbols which include text, and icons and images in some cases. The participants intentionally translate their intended verbal and non-verbal actions into symbols. Symbols are the means people use to realise their performances online. Participants make sense of each other's actions through an active interpretation of

their text. The culture is embodied in the text. Thus the text in online spaces has the same function as other forms of actions have in traditional research fields. Similarly, the task of the online researcher is to collect, understand, interpret, and represent the performance (in the form of text) of the researched. Since acts and words in traditional fields and text in online fields play the same role: it is through them people make sense of each other and in a sense they can be seen as currencies in different domains.

One may ask: 'How do you know whether postings and other forms of online text are fictitious or not?' They may well be based on created fictions. If the researcher is a participant of the online space him/her-self, he/she stands on the same ontological ground as other participants do. Through various forms of participation, all participants, including the researcher, collectively construct a culture and negotiate the reality. If the participants favour fantasy and are likely to 'fake' and construct untrue information, then this is the particular culture and therefore characteristic reality in this space. As a member of it, the researcher arguably becomes aware of this characteristic of the culture. His/her task is to describe and analyse its cultural features. Obviously, representing a culture where fantasy or fiction is involved does not automatically render the representation misinformed. In many online communities, of course, the participants may not like forging false information and the particular culture may not encourage a conscious mis-presentation of the self. This of course does not mean that every participant tells the truth. Yet, in doing research in other settings, we can never be sure whether informants lie or not and whether the documents we have access to are genuine or not. In this respect, doing research online is no more problematic than in other settings.

We have been made aware that value-free social sciences are unlikely, whether in offline or online settings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Gergen, 1991; 1994). As human beings, we are historically and culturally situated, so are our knowledge and experiences. When doing research, we do not and cannot abandon our prior knowledge and former experiences; rather, we depend on them to make sense of the studied (Bauman, 1978; Gadamer, 1979; Kuhn, 1970). Therefore, our research and inquiries are unlikely to transcend the historical and cultural ground in order to become objective and value neutral.

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In this context, reflexivity has been used as a strategy to transcend the objectivity/subjectivity dualism (Gergen and Gergen, 2000; Lincoln and Guba, 2000). In the process of research, we need to be reflexive about our own value and standpoint and about how they would influence our research practice. In the following sections, I will provide a reflexive account of how the current research was conducted.

3.2 Observing, participating and recruiting informants in the HCS

An ethnographic approach has been adopted by many researchers of online communities (see e.g. Baym, 1995a; 1995b; 1997; 1998; 2000; Carter, 2005; Correll, 1995; Fox and Roberts, 1999; Kendall, 2002; Slater, 1998; Williams, 2003). The primary method of ethnography is participant observation, which entails the researcher spending a long period of time in the field and being immersed in the culture under study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Traditionally, participant observation involves 'watching what happens, listening to what is said, [and] asking questions' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Online environments however are more likely to be textual. As a result, online participant observation includes researchers' participating in the virtual communities as members, reading and copying textual interactions, and typing questions.

Similarly, in this research, I took an ethnographic approach and did participant observation in the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* (HCS). The 'public' interactions in the forums under the current study are asynchronous and as a result the records of these interactions are saved in the public server for a long period (the earliest thread saved in this website started in November of 2003). These records are obviously raw data and can be 'harvested' at any time. At the first sight, then, it seems that participant observation might not be necessary, for the textual communications are there to access easily. However, all forms of social life are complex, whether in online or offline settings. We are reminded by Atkinson (2004; Atkinson *et al.*, 2003) that the details of social life unfold themselves slowly and as a result the observer cannot grasp the complexity and richness in just one or two encounters. It is easy to sample a set of discussion threads. These are, however, 'slices' of activities online in the HCS. To understand the 'slices' adequately, arguably, we need to be aware of the context in

which these 'slices' are embedded. According to the famous 'hemeneutics circle', a prior knowledge of the whole is needed in order to interpret the part; the understanding of the latter, then, feeds into and revises the meaning of the former; the revised whole in turn is employed to make sense of the next part (Bauman, 1978; Gadamer, 1979). Without the 'whole', according to this principle, understanding of the part is limited. Similarly, without an adequate grasp of the context, the interpretation of the 'slices' may not be sufficient. Prolonged participant observation, by contrast, helps the researcher to position the part in the whole and to revise the whole picture according to the details of the part. In the frequent and long-term engagement in the virtual field, on the one hand, the researcher is more able to see the picture of the researched in its fullness; on the other, he/she is likely to interpret it more adequately.

There are also three other dimensions of the HCS that require an ethnographic approach. First, the social interactions in forums are mediated by technology and some rules and regulations are inbuilt in this technology. Without playing with it, the researcher is unlikely to disentangle it and achieve a 'thick description' of the setting (Geertz, 1973). Secondly, the asynchronous feature of interactions means that the initiator has to wait a relatively longer time to get replies. The public feature means that the message is directed to any member, while in everyday life interactions are usually limited in a small group. Without active engagement, the researcher will have difficulties in achieving any ideas about how such interactions feel and are experienced by members, and hence is unlikely to capture the experiences of participants' actively participating. Hine (2000: 23) argues that in the passive texts, '[t]he utterances of participants might be preserved, but the experience of participating is not'. To interpret the 'inert' texts that are collected from the public server more adequately, the researcher needs to gain some insight into participants' actual participating experiences. Thirdly, forums are not the only places where interactions take place. Members can send 'private' messages or emails to each other. These messages are not observable of course. By participating, however, the researcher can receive his/her own 'private' messages, and get an idea of 'what [it] is to be a user' (Hine, 2000: 54). Thus, though the texts exist which are representatives of 'public' interactions, they are 'inert' and are not a surrogate for participant observation. To achieve a more authentic account of Chinese seafarer-partners' (SPs)

experiences with this website, I needed to participate as a member of the HCS and interact with other members. As Baym (2000: 209) has suggested:

> We cannot understand social relationships if we look only at group-text interactions. Being a member of an audience community is not just about reading a text in a particular way; rather, it is about having a group of friends, a set of activities one does with these friends, and a world of relationships and feelings that grows from those friendships.

As a member and a researcher, my engagement with this website started in April of 2004 and can be divided into five phases. Figure 3.1 below summarises these phases which were characterised by different forms of activity and their frequency. These are more fully explained in the sections which follow. Like an anthropologist walking in a 'strange' cultural setting, my participant observation enabled me to learn, appreciate, and understand the complexities of the HCS website with first-hand experiences.

Figure 3.1 Five Phases of My Engagement with the Website

Time	Visiting frequency	Features of my engagement
04/04 – 10/04	Sporadic	Initial encounter
11/04 – 05/05	At least twice a week	Scoping the online field (Familiarisation & Orientation)
06/05 – 07/05	Daily	Scoping the online field (Moving through open & 'private' spaces)
08/05 – 09/05	Daily	Active participant observation
10/05 – present	Daily	Back to primarily observing though participating sporadically

3.2.1 Initial encounters

I became a registered member of the HCS in April of 2004 with a casually chosen net-name, and enrolled with a pseudonym instead of my real name and my career as seafarer into the user information form. This, I discovered, is a quite common approach. Only a few 'real' names seem real in this website. In May of 2004 when I was gathering data for an MSc dissertation about Chinese seafarers, I realised that I could 'post' my questionnaire in to this website to elicit some responses. On May 12th

of 2004, the first time I became a participant when I posted the MSc questionnaire (Tang, 2004) in five forums of the website. After two or three postings, it became apparent that a currency system[4] was operating. I noticed that each member was given a 'strength' value. The original 'strength' value was 60. For each posting I made, my value decreased by 2. Having posted five copies of my questionnaires in five forums, ten points of my 'strength' value were deducted. Although I still had some value to post another several copies in other forums, I thought that I might need to make other kinds of postings to elicit data for my dissertation in the near future. Therefore I stopped posting to save 'strength' for the future. Two days later on May 14th, I logged on into the website to see whether my posting had received any replies, but found that only one of my original postings remained there in one forum and that nobody had replied to it. This occurred, I learned later, because my posting had violated the rule of the website: the same posting (my questionnaire in this case) can not be posted repeatedly even in different forums since this wastes web space!

The remaining single questionnaire posting received three timely replies which generated data for the dissertation. I received another two replies in 2005, half a year after I had finished the dissertation. This perhaps occurred for two reasons. First, I did not specify an expiry date in the posting. Secondly, the two respondents did not notice the posting date which appeared at the end of the posting.

3.2.2 Scoping the online field

In October of 2004 when I began studying at the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC) in Cardiff University as a research student, the idea occurred to me to take this website as the research focus, since it is a dedicated website for the seafaring community. I continued using my pseudonym. From October of 2004 to August of 2005, my major role was as a 'silent' observer. Most of the time online the website, I read postings trying to identify some features and themes of each forum, and checked members' information to search for some common characteristics of the users. I read postings in 'Newbie's Guide' forum to discover the 'regulations' of this website, and checked 'Help Information' to see how members could be rewarded for their

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[4] For a detailed description of this currency system, see section 4.2.1.

contribution. In brief, the focus of observation in this period was familiarisation and self-orientation. In December of 2004, I translated and showed some 'typical' postings to my supervisors. These were discussed at length and led to the decision that my research would focus on SPs. In March of 2005, I selected 49 threads from the forum *Communication between Seafarers and SP* (the one SPs most frequently used) and did a sketchy thematic analysis in order to find the common topics and issues and explain to my supervisors the nature and characteristics of the postings in the HCS.

Apart from observation, I participated in forums whenever I could. But this participation was largely 'responsive' rather than proactive in the sense that I only replied to others' postings rather than initiated opening ones. During the period from October 2004 to July 2005 I posted around ten replies to various messages and threads. The following is an example of my reply. One member posted a message asking other members to discuss whether seafarer-wives are faithful or not. I replied, 'What if they are faithful? And what if they are not faithful? Seafarer-wives may ask: are seafarers faithful?'

In July of 2005, I prolonged the time of observation. Whenever I felt tired of reading the literature and writing sections of the literature review, I logged into the website to check for new postings. I received several 'private' messages from three users, while I was online[5]. On receiving private messages, I checked the senders' registration information and following the links in the registration information page I checked the senders' diaries to see if there were some entries and also the postings initiated by the senders. By doing so, I acquired some information about the senders. At the same time as a matter of courtesy, I replied through private messages. This process however was slow, because it took long time to open the private message box page and then the message. After just two or three rounds of discussion, the three senders told me their QQ number (similar to ICQ through which chatting can be conducted more quickly). I tried to acquire a QQ number several times. Unfortunately, each time after submitting the application form, I got the answer: 'The system is busy. Your

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[5] If I received a private message whilst online in the website, a box would pop up telling me that I have received a new message; if I was not online, the next time I logged on, the box would pop up immediately.

application failed'. Thus I could only tell the three correspondents that I did not have QQ. So we had to continue our casual chat rather slowly through private messages. One sender complained that it needed huge patience on their part to engage in chatting with me. In another case, the sender told me that she had 'met' another user who had a QQ number and so good-bye; then she moved to QQ to chat with that person. I was literally 'dumped'! My online experiences helped me to realise and appreciate the disappointments many participants may experience.

3.2.3 Active participant observation

On August 18th of 2005, I sent out interviewee recruitment emails (see Appendix 2) to nine SPs (interviewing is the second research method, for details see section 3.3). The email addresses were obtained from users' registration information. Two failed. Most likely, these two email addresses were not valid. On August 21st of 2005, I sent out another 12 emails. Unfortunately, I received only one reply by the 22nd of August, 2005. I felt very distressed during these days, since my potential informants did not even bother sending me refusal replies. After one month, only three individuals had replied to my emails. Two accepted and one refused to participate. I realised the huge difficulties involved in finding SP interviewees. My male identity was perhaps the biggest barrier. A male researcher trying to interview females about their family lives was probably perceived as unacceptable by most people, though I promised confidentiality and anonymity in the recruiting letter. Apparently, seafarer-partners were reluctant to be interviewed with regard to their relationships with their partners face-to-face, especially by a male researcher, even though they posted messages about the same issues in a publicly accessible website!

The difficulties in finding interviewees made me rethink my research strategies. To find sufficient interviewees, I needed to gain the potential interviewees' trust (Fontana and Frey, 2000), and I needed to 'craft' relationships with my potential interviewees (Coffey, 1999). This could only be done in this online space. Since this was a textual and asynchronous space, crafting relationship depended very much on textual 'self presentation' (Goffman, 1969). My long term observation revealed that most seafarers and their partners were searching for opportunities to escape from the seafaring career. Moreover, studying abroad was a dream for a majority of Chinese. Based on these

considerations, I used the multiple identities of ex-seafarer, successful escaper, and researcher identities to create my 'personal front' in the web space.

On August 22nd, 2005, I amended with my real name and offline researcher identity on the registration form. In a self-description section which I had previously left blank, I filled in the following text:

> I have been a seafarer for seven years. Now I am doing a research degree in Seafarers' International Research Centre, Cardiff University. In my thesis, I want to explore how this website impacts SPs' lives. If you are interested in that, please send me messages or emails. Your real name is not required and your anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured. ;-)

In a personal webpage section, I established a link to my Nippon Fellow webpage. By doing so I became 'overt', and those who wanted to send me 'private' messages and those to whom I sent 'private' messages would become informed, since they were likely to check my information in order to check whom they were going to chat with. This was a very significant step in the research project and care was taken in drafting the text which I hoped would give me credibility.

The major identity work however was done by 'active' participating. In the evening of August 24th, 2005, I initiated the first opening post. It was titled as 'My Road toward Studying in the UK'. There were several members telling their personal stories via a long thread. This was done by splitting a long story into a series of short postings, each posting eliciting responses from the audience who were anxious to know the end of the story. I decided to use the same strategy dividing my story into several episodes in order to generate a long thread and attract as much attention as possible. In the initial posting, I briefly described the reasons that I wanted to leave seafaring career, and ended it with the following:

> After two years' efforts, I arrived at the UK to do postgraduate studies. I do not know whether there is somebody wanting to know how I achieved that or not. If there are, I will continue my story. Otherwise, I will not waste the space.

The website also provides a diary space for every member. Members can choose whether to write or not, and whether to allow other members to view it or not. Having made my initial posting, I also wrote my 'public' diary the first time on the website

which was open to other members, of course in English. I wanted to underline and emphasise my authenticity and competence. Moreover, it would appear exotic to write English diary entries in a Chinese domain and thus was more likely to attract attention.

Around 12 hours after I had made the initial posting, I logged on into the website eagerly to check whether my post had generated replies or not. The homepage first appeared. The bottom of this page was the section - 'The Topics I Posted', from where I found that my last night's post had got two replies and 10 hits. It had become a small thread. Then I opened this thread to read the replies. Two members replied that they were interested in my story. That afternoon, I posted the first episode of my story. On August 26th of 2005, to my excitement, I found my thread appeared in the homepage of the website as one of the 10 'Recent Hot Topics'. This meant that when members logged on into the website, my thread would appear to them immediately with the other nine hot topics. The same day, my second diary entry had received three comments. One said, 'You are a researcher, ha-ha', suggesting that some members had checked my registration information.

In the beginning of this phase of overt participant observation, I wrote two episodes of my story each day. After scrutinising patterns of participation over a long period of observation, I noticed that evening was the peak time in terms of usage of the website, probably because it was time for users to stop working and they had time to surf the website. Thus, one episode of my story was posted in the late morning (due to the UK-China time differences, it was early evening in China). The second episode was posted in the evening (early morning in China) for those who surf the website in the daytime and from their offices. Everyday, I opened the homepage for several times to check 'replies/hits' of my particular thread. I noticed twice that the position of my thread in the 10 'Recent Hot Topic' kept moving. Immediately after a new post was added to it, it would be moved to the top position. But this also applied to other 'Recent Hot Topics'. Moreover, there were more than ten 'Recent Hot Topics' competing for the ten positions at any one time. I noticed that my thread disappeared from the list and only appeared again after a new post was contributed to it.

Having observed the hierarchical features and familiarised myself with the process, I had other factors to consider when posting my following biographical episodes in

order for the thread to run as long as possible and to attract more attention. The first factor was the number of replies. If one episode had not elicited a reply, I would refrain from posting. Since the thread of my story did not aim at seeking advice or help like some other postings, most replying members actually replied to hasten me on. For example, many replied: we are waiting for the next episode! I did however genuinely experience the excitement when my thread elicited some replies (even though many replies were as simple as the example shown earlier) and real disappointment when otherwise. Probably, the feeling of excitement was the reason that some members replied to their own initial postings and complained bitterly when the postings failed to elicit a reply. The second factor was the position of my thread in the hot list and later in the thread list of the forum. I became self-consciously strategic and would not rush to post my latest episode when my thread was still in the top positions of the hot list. After two weeks, however, it seemed that my story thread could not then be qualified to remain as 'Recent' and therefore the system made it disappear from the hot list forever! In contrast, its position in the thread list of the forum also depended on the time of its latest reply. Thus my aim of posting became to keep the thread in a high position in the forum topic list. The writing of episodes and posts I hoped would broadcast my role and research project and encourage readers to visit my SIRC webpage. The original goal was never lost sight of and huge insights were gained as a participant observer.

My thread ran at peak for around one month, and its length reached 73 postings after a month. On 14th and 18th September of 2005, I sent out 55 recruitment letters to potential informants (including 16 follow-up calls to those who had not answered my first set of recruiting emails) through 'private' messages on the website rather than emails. Through 'private' messages, I hoped that receivers would check my user registration information from where my thread and diaries were directly accessible. By 26th of September, I had received 22 replies, with 12 acceptances for face-to-face interview, 3 suggesting an online interview, and 7 refusals.

The time consuming identity work described here did appear to work and have positive outcomes. One respondent said:

> I have read your thread 'My Road toward Studying in the UK'. It is very interesting. When back to Shanghai, you are welcome to contact me. [Fieldnote, 15/09/2005]

More importantly, perhaps, I made myself familiar with the managers. On September 19th, 2005, I wrote a message to the deputy manager of the HCS and asked to interview him. He replied the second day:

> I am touched by your experiences.... I expect to see you and talk to you! ... [Fieldnote, 20/09/2005]

About 4 months later when I was visiting the managers for the face-to-face interviews, they mentioned my thread and referred to my experiences described in it in the casual talk. It seems that my thread did somewhat impress them. Maybe this was one reason that they offered me very valuable help in doing face-to-face interviews (see section 3.3.3). The partial success in impressing the managers and several informants suggested the importance of the researcher' opening the self to potential informants in establishing field relationships.

Coffey (1999: 52) argues that in the traditional field '[f]ield relations are contextualised by cultural expectations, as well as being temporally and spatially located'. This is also true in an online research field. The above description of my attempts to craft relationships has demonstrated this very well. I used my 'successful escaper' and other identities to attract attention and to impress the audience; I strategically managed time to make my story thread as long as possible; and I did all of this in the online space. Online space is a disembodied space. I did not need to do 'body work' or to negotiate and produce a 'field body' in this particular field as researchers in a physical field do (Coffey, 1999). This does not mean however that my embodied experiences were insignificant in online participant observation. I used my embodied experiences of a former seafarer and a successful escaper to craft relationships. It was my body that experienced the harsh environment of the sea, the boredom of memorising English vocabulary in preparation for several language tests, and all sorts of anxiety, disappointment, and excitement in the process of taking tests and applying for Universities and a Visa. I strived to convey these feelings and embodied processes in my thread with the hope that it could invoke empathy from my potential interviewees.

The above account also indicates that active participation played a significant role in understanding other participants and making sense of their activities. It was through participation that I learned some rules of making postings and gained the first hand

experience of what participating felt like. It can be argued that my body was both a researcher's body and a participant's one. As a researcher's body, it experienced distress and disappointment when it received negative or no replies to recruitment letters, and happiness and excitement when it received positive replies from potential interviewees. As a participant's body, it experienced anxiety, disappointment, or excitement depending on how many replies my thread had generated and how many hits it had achieved. The boundaries between the researcher body and the participant one arguably were blurred, and as a result, at least part of the various feelings that I experienced as a participant should be attributed my researcher's intention of attracting attention and crafting relationships, and I cannot simply assume that other participants experience the same kinds of feelings as I did. However, the feelings of my participant body did provide some insight into other participants' subjectivity, as Hine (2000: 54) has argued, 'an ethnographer of the Internet cannot hope to understand the practices of *all* users, but through their own practices can develop an understanding of what it is to be *a* user.'

3.2.4 Back to observer's role

Having finished the autobiographical set of episodes, I reduced my level of participation and only replied to others' postings occasionally. My focus turned to observation and I became a less visible observer again. Since there were over 60 forums, and my research attention was on SP participants, I chose two forums - *Communication between Seafarers and SPs* and *Original Literature* – and the diary space that SPs were more likely to visit as the focus of the observation (see Chapter 4 for a review of the forums). Almost daily, I logged on into the HCS to read new postings in the two forums and diary entries. As for the other forums, I visited these less frequently.

Observation is one method to collect 'whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:1). There are several research questions in the current study (see Introduction). To answer the question how SPs participate in the website, it seems that analysing a set of randomly sampled postings is a better way, since every thread reflects a way of participation. In this sense, all threads are data. It is not viable to analyse all threads. A thematic

analysis of the sampled threads, however, would provide us with an overview of the ways of SPs' participation. Therefore, I systematically sampled 33 threads from the forum *Communication between Seafarers and SPs* for thematic analysis. At the time of sampling (May of 2005), there were 33 pages of discussion topics in this forum. I chose the last one of each page for inclusion in the sample. Ten of these thirty-three threads, however, were initiated by seafarers and thus were excluded from analysis. Though small, the sample provided a general picture of SPs activities in this forum. The sampled threads were categorised into four groups: emotional postings, informational postings, general discussion postings, and friendship initiating postings. The emotional postings were further sub-categorised into two groups: revealing frustrations caused by separation and the relationship and expressing reflections on the relationship. Figure 3.2 below provides an overview. These postings will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6 and 7. The long term observation suggested that except postings revealing excitement and happiness (when, for example, their seafarer husbands/boyfriends are coming home), the categories can more or less cover the remaining ones.

Figure 3.2 An Overview of the Sampled Postings

Categories	Sub-Categories	Number of Threads	Sections these threads are discussed
Emotional postings	Frustrations caused by the relationship	4	6.2.3
	Reflections on life/love	6	6.2.4
Informational postings		1	6.1.1
General discussion		8	6.3.1
Friendship initiating		1	7.1

To throw light on other research questions, such as how the website is managed, what problems SPs are likely to face, how participation in the HCS helps them to address

these problems, and what the perceived impacts of participation are, however, sampling would not fit for the purpose well. Many postings shed no light on these questions and therefore could not serve as data for them. Writings that helped to answer these questions were rather scattered. The better way, then, was to *gather*, rather than sample, data in the process of prolonged observation. Therefore, I paid particular attention to and collected those writings that:

- Revealed problems SPs faced due to the absence of their husbands/boyfriends
- Indicated relationships between SP participants in this website
- Disclosed SPs' feelings towards participation in the website
- Reflected how the website was managed
- Showed the reasons for coming to and leaving the website

The gathered postings and diary entries threw light on the issues relevant to the current research. However, it was judged that observing participants' revelation would not provide enough information for these questions. For example, very few SPs disclosed their feelings and opinions towards participating in the website. Therefore, qualitative interviewing was undertaken to gather more data in order to complement those gathered through online participant observation.

3.3 Qualitative interviewing

The qualitative interview is a 'conversation with a purpose' and a structure (Kvale, 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The researcher guides the conversation according to the overarching research questions. The participant reflects on his/her feelings and thoughts, translates them into words, and communicates them to the researcher. On receiving these words, the researcher interprets them, feeds the interpretation back in order to be either verified or corrected, and explores further. In this process, on the one hand, the participants 'open' the part of their minds that the researcher is exploring, albeit the extent to which they open themselves depends very much on the relationship between them and the researcher (Fontana and Frey, 2000). On the other hand, through negotiation, the researcher reaches an agreement with the participant that they are seeing things from a similar perspective. The interview data, then, not only added to the data collected online, but also helped to verify them.

3.3.1 Sampling

Originally, I planned to do the interviews in two ways. One was face-to-face, and the other was through emails. China is a large country, and thus for practical and pragmatic reasons, I chose to limit face-to-face interviews to Shanghai and Shandong Province. As to SP participants from other regions, I planned to interview some of them through emails.

The website has a 'Member Information Database' which contains all members' registration information and their participating records, including age, gender, e-mail address, the first visit time, the last visit time, the number of postings made, the number of diary entries made, the level of education, and the region of residence. This database is accessible to every member. As a result, it enabled me to construct a rank-ordering of members according to the number of postings they made. The more postings one made, the higher his/her position in the member list.

In August and September 2005, I noted down all the sixty SP participants who were registered being from Shanghai and Shandong Province, who made more than five postings, who visited the website in the last two months, and who did not specify that they were not SPs (some of them were working for manning agencies). The list thus generated constituted my potential face-to-face interviewees, and I sent them recruitment messages either through emails or private messages as described in Section 3.2. By October 2005, fourteen accepted the interview request, and another three agreed to be interviewed through emails. I had planned to do the fieldwork in China in November and December of 2005. For unexpected reasons, however, I had to postpone it to February of 2006. For this reason, I wrote a message in October to all recruited informants to apologise for the change of the plan. At the same time, I requested their contact details for the convenience of future communication. Only one woman actually gave me her telephone number. The others said that I could send them messages when I was back to China, preferring a less intrusive approach.

I started email interviews in November 2005. From the 'Member Information Database', I noted down the first 550 female members in the member list who were from regions other than Shanghai and Shandong (where I planned to do face-to-face

interviews) and did not specify themselves as non-SPs. All of them had made at least four postings. This constituted a 'SP Participant List'. In the process of making this list, and also when choosing face-to-face potential informants, I observed that the fewer postings they had made, the less frequently SPs visited the HCS and the more likely they did not visit it in the last two months. For example, among the first 100 of the 550 members, fifteen did not visit the website in the last two months, while among the last 100 sixty-four did not; and most of the first 100 visited the website many times, while the majority of the last 100 visited less than five times. I also noticed that those that had not posted anything normally spent less than 2 hours in this website and logged in only once or twice. The observation thus suggested that the fewer postings an individual made, the more likely that he/she was a passer-by instead of a participant. Since this study focused on SP participants, I only chose potential email interviewees from that 550. This was also the reason which informed my decision to choose those who had made at least five postings as potential face-to-face interviewees.

The recruitment letter was sent through the private message of the website (see Appendix 4). In the beginning, I tried to use a systematic sampling strategy. Among the first 120 SPs in the list, I chose every third one to send the letter. As mentioned earlier, some SPs had not visited the HCS for two months. Arguably, they were more likely to be absent from the HCS than others within the period of recruitment and therefore were less likely to read the letter (to read the letter, one has to visit the website first). Therefore, after the first 120, I only chose those who visited the HCS in the last month. More than two thirds of the last 430 members however did not participate in the last month. In order to receive more replies, I ended up sending the letter to all those who did so.

One may ask: by excluding those who did not visit in the last month, would you not lose their accounts of experiences? This, however, might not be the case. After the interviews, I continued to observe informants' activities online. Having noticed later that several of them had not visited it for more than a month, I sent out follow-up emails for the reasons. By doing so, to a certain extent, I captured such kind of experiences. Moreover, some SP participants who did not participate for a long time

revealed the reasons for the absence in their diary entries. This made me aware of some of the reasons that stopped or prevented SPs from participating.

In the end, one hundred and sixty six members were sampled and the recruiting message was sent to them. However, the response rate was very low. Thirty-six replied to my message. Thirty accepted, while six refused. Having been provided with their email addresses, I emailed those thirty SPs the interview questions. Finally, only 13 replied to my questions. Thus, the sample more or less becomes a self-elected one. There have been mixed results of email surveys: while some received higher response rates than conventional one, others reported lower rates (see Schaefer and Dillman, 1998; Selwyn and Robson, 1998; Witmer *et al.*, 1999). Instead of a survey questionnaire, my interview instrument consisted of more than 20 open-ended questions (see Appendix 5). This seemed to put several potential informants off. Upon receiving the interview question email, three potential informants suggested through emails that the interview instrument was not 'user friendly' because it did not provide multiple answers to choose. I explained to them that this was a qualitative study and therefore I could not design the instrument into a questionnaire. Finally, these three SPs dropped out; and one said explicitly that she had no time to answer so many open-ended questions. Another reason for the low response rate may be that potential participants could not see incentives to do it (Witmer *et al.*, 1999). Besides these thirteen replies, another four SPs from Shanghai also answered my questions through emails. Thus, in all, seventeen email interview scripts were produced.

3.3.2 Re-contacting with potential face-to-face interviewees

At the end of January 2006, about ten days before I left for China to do the fieldwork, I sent out messages to those respondents asking for their telephone number for the second time (the first time was in October 2005, see section 3.3.1). Only two of them replied to me the following day. One refused my request this time and apologised for changing her mind. The other one, Crystal-Heart who was very positive in the earlier recruiting stage, gave me her telephone number, but her tone had changed somewhat. She had replied in August 2005:

> My boyfriend comes back in November. If you come, we can arrange a gathering [with my SP friends]. You can interview me [and them] at that time.

In contrast to this enthusiastic facilitating request, some 5 months later, her reply was:

> As to the interview, let us wait and see. If I have time, I will do.

In the next following several days, I did not receive anything, although I checked my email box and message box several times a day.

The silence from my would-be informants was a severe blow to me: there were only several days left before I entered the 'field', but I had only two informants who were directly contactable! Typical research anxieties are illustrated in an extract from my research diary:

> Still no reply! I have checked three times today. There are only five days left before I am going back. But I have only got two informants to interview! My excitement of going home is completely ruined. [04/02/2006]

The pressure was tremendous. I checked the member list again and then noted down some SP members who were from Shanghai and Shandong and who had registered after my last search. Another batch of emails and/or messages was sent out in the hope of recruiting more. Only one replied before I left for the 'field'. She refused face-to-face interview, but accepted an email one. After I arrived to do fieldwork in China, another two – Blue-Elf and Mary – accepted my request, and Lily who agreed in the first call replied me with her telephone number. Interviewees were gradually becoming available.

On February 10th of 2006, I entered the 'field' full of worries and uncertainty, since I had only two SP respondents' phone numbers, plus the two managers' contact details. Having settled into accommodation in Shanghai, I logged onto the website. Smiling-Face, who agreed to participate formerly but did not reply to my recent call, was actually online. I sent her a reminder immediately. After several rounds of negotiation, she finally gave me her telephone number. Her condition was that she could bring her friend along as a companion who was also a SP member of the website. Of course, I hoped that she could bring more friends and introduce me to others. Later after the interview, I asked Smiling-Face why she had not replied to my second call even though she had agreed to an interview in the first call. She explained:

> In the beginning when I agreed to participate, I did not think too much. Later, many things came up in my mind. I needed to think twice. I think that some people do not take the trouble [to be interviewed].

Smiling-Face had clearly got 'cold feet' about being interviewed and agreed that she had considered the invitation too hastily.

3.3.3 The gatekeepers

Within a week of my return to China, I first went to Nanjing, a city not far from Shanghai, to interview the two managers of the website. I discovered later that this was a timely decision. After I arrived, the managers told me that Crystal-Heart (a recruited individual) had just contacted them about my trustworthiness as a researcher. Then to my delight, one manager telephoned a SP member who lived in Nanjing asking whether she could arrange a gathering with several SPs that evening. He also assured me that he would ask Crystal-Heart to help me in Shanghai. A few days later when I logged on to this website in Shanghai, I noticed that the managers had made a posting calling for SPs in Shanghai to give assistance. Crystal-Heart also made a posting to organise another gathering in Shanghai. This help in recruiting SPs was crucial as the research and fieldwork period was limited to 8 weeks.

The dinner gathering was organised by the managers and it took place in an enclosed room of a restaurant. The two managers, two single SPs, one seafarer couple, one SP with her friend, and I comprised the group. To my surprise, Rainbow, who had agreed to participate in the first call but ignored my second call, also attended the gathering. I felt awkward to ask her the reason. Probably, Helena, another SP in the gathering, answered this question when I mentioned the difficulties in recruiting informants:

> You made a mistake. You should have asked them [the managers] to contact SPs, instead of having done it yourself. They have the influence.

In fact, during the fieldwork only Crystal-Heart met me alone; the others were either with same sex friends or in a group. There may have been a number of reasons. One was my male identity. Crystal-Heart contacted me when she was trying to help me interview more SPs. She thought that the best way to do that was to arrange a gathering, since, in her words, 'they are girls, you know, feeling uneasy to be interviewed alone.' The second reason was my authenticity. The discourses of online fraudulence and the virtual nature of the Internet are abundant, which certainly exert a significant influence on social actors. Although more recent online researchers have

argued against the dichotomy between the virtual and the real (e.g. Miller and Slater, 2000; Orgad, 2004), my respondents showed caution once I tried to shift from online to offline. As mentioned above, Crystal-Heart consulted with the managers about my trustworthiness. Lily and Blue-Elf replied to my message with a similar cautious tone:

> To be honest, I do not know who you are and doubt whether you are really doing the research. ... I am a SP. Therefore, I trust you this time as a true researcher. [Lily]
>
> I do not know whether I should trust you or not. I am sort of worrying. [Blue-Elf]

All these encounters and communications illustrate the importance of key informants or gatekeepers for conducting fieldwork, which has been stressed by numerous authors (e.g. Bryman, 2004; Fontana and Frey, 2000; Whyte, 1955). Although the object of this research is an online community and all sampled members can be approached, only a few of them were actually able to be approached face-to-face. They either worried about the researcher's authenticity, or felt uneasy to be interviewed by a man, or 'did not want to take the trouble', or had other concerns. The managers' involvement however cleared up part of their hesitation. They helped me with my identity work. To a certain extent, it was based upon their support that the authenticity of my researcher's identity was made convincing. They also helped organise two gatherings, in which participants felt at ease to accept a male researcher's interview. The managers therefore opened gates and 'sponsored' my research work in supportive ways. In return I offered a summary report to them at the conclusion of my study.

3.3.4 Conducting face-to-face interviews

The interview with the managers took place in their office, which was a dull room in an old building. The chief manager, who had established this website, was an active seafarer. Being a website manager could hardly make him any money to support himself, let alone his family. The deputy manager, in contrast, gave up his seafarer career and committed his time fully to the development of the website, in hope that his effort may bring financial returns in the future. So far, they had not found effective means to make ends meet. Therefore, it did not surprise me to find that their office was not worth showing off. It was winter in February. The temperature in the office was near zero since there was no heating facility. There were two desktops on two

untidy tables. One was quite new, while the other was old. They told me later that only the new one was working and that they both had laptops at home. Another of their assets was a fax machine. Behind the HCS was a modestly equipped grey little office. It was strange to think about the 'community' that was enabled from this small room.

The interview with managers was an informal one. They were reluctant to be recorded and argued that recording would make them uneasy and constrain them. A casual chat, they believed, could serve the purpose better. We talked several hours in the afternoon. They let their thoughts direct the conversation. Occasionally, I put forward the questions I had prepared for this interview to channel the direction. The atmosphere was friendly. On the second day, I thanked them for their help and hospitality (they paid all fees and dinner bills incurred in the evening's gathering with SPs and arranged my accommodation that night in the name of the *Home of Chinese Seafarers*). They said, 'Please do not mention it. We are all young men.' Probably, it was also because we all had seafaring backgrounds and this shared experience bonded us in a helpful way.

While the interview with the managers was conducted in a private space, as mentioned above, all face-to-face interviews with SPs were conducted in public spaces: one in a university campus, the others were in restaurants or cafés. No matter how hard I tried, it was impossible to find a place in restaurants that was quiet and insulated from public eyes. While the background noise made me worry about the recording quality, the (imagined) curious public eyes and the occasional interruptions from waiters increased my anxiety in the beginning, since this was the first time that I had undertaken research interviews. Fortunately, with the interview process going on, I more or less lost my uneasiness in listening and thinking.

The first interviews conducted in China in the gathering arranged by the managers were certainly the most stressful ones. They took place at a dinner table. We kept swapping seats to facilitate the individual interviews. The invited guests did not all arrive at the same time, which meant that ongoing interviews were interrupted. Two arrived while the interviewing with the first one was in progress. Though we were in an enclosed room, which was insulated from other guests, the comings and goings of

the serving waiters could not be avoided. Moreover, while one interview was taking place, the others in the group were chatting happily and loudly close by. The voice of the interviewing seemed swamped by the 'background noise'. Though the interviewees appeared lost in thinking and answering my questions, these distractions made me nervous and uneasy. I kept worrying whether my digital recorder 'knew', as I did, to be 'all ears' towards the right direction. Fortunately, I found later that though it could not screen background sound, it was faithful to the nearest voice. Another problem preoccupying me was a matter of etiquette: identifying the appropriate time to do the interviews. It was not polite to do the interviews during the course of dinner, neither was it polite to request an interview by interrupting their cheerful talking. Would there be enough time left for me after the dinner? I had to wonder. Only after I had finished all four interviews did I then feel relaxed.

It can be argued that my interviewees might have felt just as uneasy as I did. However, it is unwise to speculate on this. They were each in the safe company of friends and appeared calm. All of them seemed to be involved in answering and thinking about my questions and they soon became interactive. There were opposite signals displayed too. Smiling-Face's friend, also a SP and who accompanied her for the interview, refused to be interviewed face-to-face. She felt uneasy and preferred to answer my questions through an email correspondence. Another respondent admitted that she was nervous before I switched on the recording machine.

Although the interviews were not focus group in design, the group setting meant that it was possible in the gatherings that one individual's answer affected those of others later on. For example, I tried to explore with each interviewee delicate areas:

> Interviewer: Which topics do you think should not be discussed here?
> Spring: As they two have said, between partners like us who quite often do not stay together, mutual trust is very important.

Occasionally, others broke into the interview and interrupted its flow and direction:

> Interviewer: What was your first impression of this website?
> Golden-Eye: I felt very refreshing. I felt very happy that there is such a website for the seafaring group. It seemed that I would meet more friends with whom I have common language.
> Yangtze-Girl broke in: Yes, we got a place to confide our feelings. This made us happy.

Finally, we found companies!

However, these interruptions did not happen too frequently. When one interview was in progress, more often than not, the others talked among themselves rather than listened to the interview closely. Thus, all in all, the data generated were largely from individual interviews.

In the two pre-arranged gatherings, two SPs who had already answered my interview questions through email correspondence appeared. I took the opportunity to interview them again face-to-face and this produced an interesting contrast. They answered some of my questioned in different ways. The following extracts taken from two separate interviews with Yangtze-Girl are two examples of this shift in new path:

> Q: Which features of this website impressed and attracted you? Can you explain the reasons?
>
> A: People are very sincere in this website and friends online are communicating with soul! Last year, I met some unhappy matters both in work and in home. He was not home. It was SPs here, and other sisters' assistance and care that led me tide over those days with strength! At that time, Mrs Bean even wrote a postal letter to me and gave me a cake voucher worth RMB 100!
>
> [Email interview extract]

> Q: Which features of this website attract you?
>
> A: Diary, Original Literature, and Communication forums. They are interesting and typical.
>
> Q: In what ways are they typical?
>
> A: For example, in Original Literature, many people tell their own stories and experiences. I can learn something from it, drawing on their experiences or their attitude. This will pacify my emotions and make me mature and moderate. In the forum of Communication between Seafarers and SPs, we can discuss some questions together that we come across. This makes my thinking clearer. The onlookers see most clearly.
>
> Q: You mean that others can give you some advice?
>
> A: Yes. We are young. Those elder SPs have a better understanding of life.
>
> [Face-to-face interview extract]

Yangtze-Girl's answers were quite different here and the opportunities to probe further helped elicit more depth for the researcher to verify.

The differences are not surprising. One the one hand, unlike physical objects, whose (re)actions follow fixed laws, the (re)actions of human beings are always subject to change (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Different contexts – different time, different places, different people – can activate different responses (Van Maanen, 1988). On the other hand, interviewing is to ask interviewees to recollect their past experiences. Bauman (2003: 87) argues:

> Memory *selects*, and *interprets* – and *what* is to be selected and *how* it needs to be interpreted is a moot matter and an object of continuous contention.

As a result, interviewees' interpreting and answering of questions are always context specific. We cannot say that one account is true and the other is false or that neither is true simply because the two accounts are different. They may be both true. It is only because the interviewees' reflective glances chose to shed light on different episodes of their past experiences (Schutz, 1967).

It is noticeable from the above examples that in email interviews, respondents' answers were concise while they gave more detailed account in face-to-face interviews. One email interviewee stated that she had spent two hours to answer the questions. One face-to-face interview however took thirty minutes on average. Obviously, speaking is less demanding and time consuming than typing. This encouraged face-to-face interviewees to explain more in detail, while email interviewees were driven to take shortcuts. Moreover, it was easier for me to follow up issues in face-to-face interviews. On the one hand, probing made interviewees explain further; on the other, interpreting and repeating their answers invoked not just interviewees' confirmation or disagreement, but also new account to justify their positions. Of course, email interviewing has its own advantages. First, it allows respondents to answer questions at a convenient moment. Secondly, it gives respondents time to articulate and organise their thoughts; while face-to-face interviewing requires instant response, which often results in unfinished and broken sentences. Thirdly, email interviewing saves transcribing and travelling costs. Fourthly, there are respondents who only accept to participate in an email interview. Willow, for example, replied to me, 'Sorry, a meeting is out of the question! Our exchange can only be restricted to online world!'

3.4 Translation and data analysis

In all, I interviewed thirty SP participants. This produced 32 interview transcripts (as mentioned earlier, two informants participated in both email and face-to-face interviewing. Twelve were from face-to-face interviews, three from telephone interviews (although I suggested face-to-face interviews, three informants preferred this less intrusive way), and seventeen from email interviews. In addition to these, an unrecorded interview with the managers produced one transcript, which was reconstructed immediately after the interview.

I translated all interview transcripts from Chinese to English. In the process, I utilised an online Chinese/English dictionary (http://dj.iciba.com/). It gives users not only the corresponding words and expressions, but also the sentences that such words and expressions are embedded. For example, when I typed in the Chinese character which means 'angry', the online dictionary showed me a long list, including the following three items:

- An angry customer
- I fly into a rage
- He got into a temper

Thus, in addition to the translated words, it also gave me the contexts in which those similar words and expressions are used. This helped me to see the nuance of those words and choose the most appropriate one and my English vocabulary as a researcher/translator also expanded during these tasks.

In order to authenticate and double-check my translations and also improve my translating skill, I paid a local translating service company, while doing interview fieldwork in Shanghai, to translate three email interview transcripts which I had translated beforehand. The translation cost around GBP 15 per thousand Chinese characters. Altogether, I spent around GBP 150 in this. Being a student with limited resources, I was not able to afford to have all transcripts translated by professionals. Nevertheless, the comparison showed that the three professional translations were similar to mine, though we sometimes used different words and expressions. The following is an example of the comparison:

In real life, I bear it alone! **It is quite natural that my family [members] are not happy**

with my choosing of a seafarer. If taking this and that kinds of unhappiness into consideration, probably, he and me would not come to today [if I complain to my parents]! Therefore, I can only shoulder pressures in work and unhappiness in real life alone! Since I found the Home of Chinese Seafarers, I discovered sisters that, like me, are waiting. Probably, sea and seafarers draw us very near; there is nothing to hide! I discovered that they also experienced what I did and we encourage each other. We are like sisters, family members! [My translation]

In practical life we have to live and work under pressure. **If you are married to a seaman, you are sure to have something unhappy in life.** But if you were beset with this and that troubles, I guess I would not keep it going on with him thus far. So the work pressure and the unhappy realities shall be borne all by yourself. Ever since I found Seamen's Home, I've found a large group of sisters like me waiting patiently for their beloved ones. Maybe it is the blue sea and seamen that bring us closer, leaving nothing to hide from each other. It is here that I found that what I have experienced is also experienced in their life, thus we treat each other like sisters and family members, mutually encouraging each other. [Translation of the translating company]

Except for the second sentence, the meanings of the two paragraphs appear broadly similar. The professional translator, however, did not know much of the context and information about this interviewee. As a result, he/she interpreted wrongly the second sentence. The interviewee, who was not married, meant that her parents were not happy about her choice and therefore she could not talk about her problems with them but had to bear the pressure alone; while the translator misunderstood this as that her family life was not happy because she married a seafarer. This, however, does not lead to 'So the work pressure and the unhappy realities shall be borne all by yourself'. Thus, I learnt very quickly that it is important to be aware of the context and background in order to interpret more accurately (Gadamer, 1979). Nevertheless, I also learned something from the professional translator, for example, 'draw us close' rather than 'near', and some expressions such as 'bosom friends', 'tide over difficult times'.

These strategies, of course, did not guarantee that nothing was 'lost in translation', for language is subtle and culturally specific. However, they helped me to be as faithful as possible to what the interviewees meant. With regards to the online field-notes, in

order to save time, I only translated those to which I would pay close analytical attention and additional materials for supervision meetings.

Overall, I estimate that the complete translation of 32 interview transcripts took around 120 hours and partial translation of selected postings and diary entries from the HCS took another 50 hours. Clearly, this ate into valuable doctoral research time. Nevertheless, the time was well spent as it kept me close to the data and can be understood as informal attempts at sense-making in the process of analysis.

Interview and observation data were analysed utilising software Nvivo and inductive techniques (Bloor, 1978; Charmaz, 2000; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Having imported interview transcripts and fieldnotes into Nvivo, I started coding them, which was assigning labels or tags to the qualitative data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Each code represented the meaning of the part of data that it labelled. In this way, the large amount of qualitative data was divided into small meaning units, and the units were then condensed into codes, which were more manageable and easier to retrieve. After coding, I grouped the codes, according to their properties and meanings and research questions, into categories. As a result, several big categories were produced: SPs' offline environment (discussed mainly in Chapter 5), features of the online environment (section 6.2), informational support online (section 6.1), emotional release and support (section 6.2), entertainment (section 6.3), doing friendships (Chapter 7), other resources gained from the HCS (Chapter 8), and the impacts of participation (Chapter 6 – 8). Thus, the smallest meaning units (codes) and the biggest ones (categories) for this study were produced.

The next step undertaken in organising and analysing the data was differentiating the codes within one category into sub-categories. For example, the category 'SP's offline environment' was divided into five sub-categories: emotional loneliness, stigmatisation, objection from parents, social isolation, and self-repression. These sub-categories were further divided into smaller sub-sub-categories when possible. In this process, the large qualitative data was made meaningful and the picture of SPs' participation in the HCS became more visible and clearer.

Certainly, the actual process was not as straightforward as described above. There were always 'negative exceptions' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) or 'deviant cases' (Bloor, 1978) emerging which could not be fitted into common patterns or existing categories. In such cases, either existing (sub)categories were modified so as to include the exceptional cases (Bloor, 1978) or new (sub)categories were created. Discussions with my supervisors and reading relevant literature also shed new light into data interpretation (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) and thus helped me to revise and refine (sub)categories. Further, writing and revising the thesis was a process of interpreting and reinterpreting data. As a result, in the course of coding, categorising, and writing and revising the thesis, changes and modifications were inevitably and constantly made.

Randomly sampled threads were analysed manually according to themes of the opening postings as mentioned in sub-section 3.2.4. The resultant categories were tested by subjecting them to more threads. Furthermore, three sources of data: interviews, observational fieldnotes, and sampled threads, made 'between-method' triangulation possible (Denzin, 1970). This is not to say that this thesis presents *the* picture of SPs in the HCS. Rather, it tells *a* story of those who were relatively visible in the website.

3.5 An overview of the informants

Generally speaking, the SP participants of the HCS were young, relatively well educated, and the majority of them were unmarried. Among the 550 in the 'Participants List', the range of their stated age was from 18 to 48 (a few registered their age as either below 5 or above 100. These were excluded). Among the first one hundred participants in the list, eighty-seven percent were aged between 20 and 30; eighty percent registered as either university students or graduates; ninety-eight percent were either working or studying; and seventy-three percent were unmarried. Of course, the registered information may not be correct. With regards to the 30 interviewees (see Appendix 7), twenty-nine received or were receiving higher education, twenty-five were aged below 30, and only eleven were married. Thus, the features of the SP participants of the HCS reflect the broad picture of Chinese Internet users – young and concentrated in urban areas (CNNIC, 2005; Harwit, 2004).

Appendix 7 shows that the range of the sample is not narrow[6]. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 42. While some of them had a relationship with a seafarer for just around one year, one informant had been married to a seafarer for 16 years. This does not mean that the sample is representative. As described in sub-section 3.3.1, the email interviewees tended to be self-selected rather than randomly sampled. This may indicate that those who had positive views towards the website accepted to participate in the research, while others declined or ignored my request. In the process of soliciting and conducting face-to-face interviewees, as shown in sub-section 3.3.3, I relied heavily on gatekeepers – the managers of the site. They arranged a party to facilitate the interviews and encouraged SPs in Shanghai to support my research. While paying gratitude to the managers for they made the study less problematic, I also need to acknowledge the danger of utilising such gatekeepers. It seemed that those participants that the managers contacted respected them and the website. Thus, they had good feelings and positive opinions towards the HCS. Consequently, the sample may have excluded those who did not benefit much from participation, and the accounts I collected for the research skewed towards positive experiences.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The design of this project and the research process as described in this chapter strictly complied with the British Sociological Association's (BSA) Statement of Ethical Practice and the requirements of the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (SREC) at Cardiff University. From the outset of the project I was aware of certain ethical issues around the observation of persons in a public forum. This was initially discussed with my supervisors and became formalised when it became a

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[6] In later discussions of SPs' activities in the website, although this thesis does not explicitly differentiate SPs according to their ages, marital status, education levels, or lengths of relationships, it does differentiate between more experienced and relatively new SPs. As we will see later, more experienced ones tend to be more able to provide various information for others, while new ones are more likely to learn and acquire information and advice from others. Experience is related, but not identical, to age and length of the relationship. For example, a participant may have been in relationship with her boyfriend for 5 years, her experience of being a SP is much shorter if her boyfriend just graduated from a maritime college and joined a ship.

requirement to submit a formal application to the SREC before conducting the research. I prepared the application material and submitted them to the Committee immediately. In January of 2006[7], I received the appropriate approval from the Cardiff School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee. Next, I shall provide an account of ethical issues and considerations of the current research.

The essence of this online space is stored in a public server. It can be accessed by any connected computer and is available in full to anyone who comes across it. Everyone is welcome to register with it. Not just registered members can view its contents, but also non-registered newcomers are allowed to do that as guests, though they cannot initiate or reply to a posting. Thus, at first sight, this seems to be an open and a public space. On this basis, Salem *et al.* (1997) argue that there is no presumption of confidentiality since messages are posted in the knowledge that anyone can read them. Moreover, by using pseudonyms the authors of such postings can be confident to remain anonymous. King (1996) holds a similar opinion, suggesting that researchers should be exempt from seeking informed consent in such a situation. However, many researchers do not agree with this stance. Eysenbach and Till (2001) suggest that whether informed consent should be sought or not might depend on community size, accessibility, and norms. According to them, if access to the forum does not need to be registered, then informed consent may not necessary; otherwise, this space is only accessible to its members and therefore not a public space and informed consent is necessary. For Flicker *et al.* (2004), Waskul (1996), Waskul and Douglas (1996), and Williams (2003), however, seeking informed consent is always necessary. Waskul (1996) and Wasku & Douglas (1996) argue that online space is 'privately public' and 'publicly private'. The boundary between public and private is blurred in online space. In this space, people are likely to disclose private things. This feature renders its status as a public space problematic (Williams, 2003). In the HCS website, some SPs revealed details of their private lives in their postings. The reason for them to do this probably was to seek advice and help rather than being studied. Although participants

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[7] The requirement of Ethics Committee's approval was introduced to students in Cardiff University after I had started online fieldwork. Therefore, I did some online fieldwork before obtaining the approval from the Committee. However, that part of fieldwork was undertaken in strict compliance with BSA Statement of Ethical Practice.

were aware that this space was publicly accessible, given the feature of this website, they probably only anticipated seafarers and SPs as the audience. A study however may disseminate these postings to other sources. Some participants may not want their postings to be academically disseminated (Fox and Roberts, 1999). Therefore, it is necessary to try the best to inform the participants and give them the opportunity to withdraw from research freely if they wish.

As a result, I contacted the general manager in May 2005 before actually embarking in this project, informed him of the nature and purpose of my research, and sought his permission for the study in this website (see Appendix 1). He gave me the permission a few days later when his ship entered a port and he had access to the Internet. In October 2005, at my request, the manager sent a public message to every registered member on my behalf (see Appendix 3). This message contained the researcher's personal information, the aim and data collection process of the study, the measures to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Also, participants were informed that they were free to send me emails to ask for their postings to be excluded from my data collection. In all, only one participant sent me emails requesting to be excluded from the study. As a result, I did not choose her writings as data. It should be noticed, however, that this message might not have reached everyone whose postings had been collected, since some registered members who posted posts here might have stopped participating in the website and have been inactive for a long time and therefore would not visit the website to read this message (Waskul, 1996).

There is another layer of protection for the participants. This website is for Chinese seafarers and their partners. Its language is Chinese. The writing of this study however is in English and all names further anonymised. All data quoted in this thesis and other future publications is translated into English. This will inevitably provide extra protection and anonymity. By these measures, I believe that I took all reasonable measures to ensure that no damage would be done to participants.

Summary

The sections of this chapter have described the ways in which I set about researching the key research questions. Since November 2004, I have been observing this website, though in the first few months the observation only aimed at familiarisation and

orientation. From June 2005, I started actively participating and systematically observing in this website. The online fieldwork experience suggested that on the one hand it is important to open the self in order to craft field relations more effectively; and that on the other hand, active participation would help the research to make sense of observed activities. To complement participant observation, during the period of November 2005 to April 2006, I interviewed 30 SP participants through emails and telephone and face-to-face interviews and the two managers of the website via face-to-face interviews. Over two years of systematic participant observation and qualitative interviews have generated a large amount of rich data, which will be presented and discussed in the following empirical chapters.

Chapter 4 Introducing the HCS and Authenticity in the HCS

This chapter aims to provide an account of the research setting – the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* (HCS) website – including its history, development, functions, management, and macro-environment, and to discuss the authenticity of its postings. Drawing upon online fieldwork and data from the interviews with the managers, the first two sections of this chapter explore the history and management of the HCS. These two sections show that the HCS is a strictly regulated space. Drawing upon existing literature, the third section of this chapter looks into the regulation of Internet use in China. It indicates that the highly regulated environment of Internet use in China subjects both website managers and general users into self-censoring and self-regulation. In order to survive the particular political environment, the HCS has to monitor its participants constantly and avoid any politically sensitive issues appearing in the website. At the same time, the participants' writings have also shaped the landscape of the HCS. In the last section, I will address the issue of authenticity of information in the HCS.

4.1 History of the HCS

The website was established on May 1st in 2003 by a fairly new seafarer who was keen to open up the communication potential for the seafaring community. In an email correspondence he sent in response to some of my general initial queries, he explained:

> For a long time, the government has not paid enough attention or shown concern to the seafaring community, though seafarers are increasingly gaining attention from ordinary people. In 2000, I graduated and became a new seafarer, but I was not satisfied with my study and career. Later on in my seafarer life, I feel as if seafarers are forgotten by the society. As a result, the idea came to me to establish a dedicated website for seafarers, where people in the seafaring community can communicate with each other on issues they are interested in and exchange information.

The manager felt that general public did not know much about seafarers apart from the stereotypical view that seafarers are promiscuous and have girls in every port. Though of course, some seafarers might be like that, the manager thought that the perception was ill-informed as many seafarers tend to be faithful to their partners. For

this reason, he hoped that the website would present the Chinese society with a more genuine and accurate picture of seafarers.

Seafarer-partners (SPs) are the main contributors to this website, though the name of the HCS indicates that it is about seafarers. At the beginning of its development, it did not take SPs into consideration and was originally intended mainly for seafarers. Professional seafarers, however, are not able to participate in it regularly, since when they are at sea their access to the Internet is very limited. In contrast, SPs are on shore and therefore have easier access to Internet facilities. The special circumstances (see chapter 5) that they are in drive them to search for information and things related to seafarers. Through various ways, such as online search engines, the following of links in other seafaring related websites, and being introduced to it by their partners, SPs find their way to the HCS and become its key participants. Their ability to participate regularly makes the HCS more like a SPs' than seafarers' site. In October of 2005, the manager stated in the home page: 'many people told me that the name of the website should be changed to *Home of Chinese Seafarer-Partners...*'

To accommodate SPs, the managers of the HCS created several forums. The first, opened within the first year, was called *Communication between Seafarers and SPs*. This forum soon gained popularity, becoming the biggest forum – it contained nearly one third of all the postings. The majority of participants in this forum are SPs, which further illustrates their contribution. In January 2006, another forum *Garden of Seafarer-Wives and Children* was set up. Later in February of 2006, the third one – *SP Club* – was established, which is accessible exclusively to SPs who have joined in this club. The names of these three forums convey their particular contents. The first one is about general issues, the second one is about children, while the third one is largely about issues related only to SPs, though the boundaries may not be very clear and there are some overlaps at times.

The stated aims of the HCS were to provide:
- An information exchange platform for seafarers and future seafarers
- Careers advice for future seafarers
- A communication platform for seafarers and seafarers' wives

- A place for seafarers to meet and date girls who are interested in seafarers

- Job information for seafarers

These official aims do not however seem compatible with the manager's former idea of presenting the general public with a rich and genuine picture of seafarers. Rather, promoting seafaring communities' welfare is the central issue. It also appeared that the targeted audience of the website was exclusively that of seafaring communities. These forums were unlikely to attract the focus of the general public more widely, unless they were concerned to find out about seafarers' lives and situations.

By October 15th 2005 some 19 months or so after its start, the website had 11,532 registered members, including Chinese seafarers, students of Chinese Maritime Education and Training (MET) institutes, partners of seafarers and seafaring students, Chinese shipping companies, crewing agencies, and others in seafaring communities. In the autumn of 2005, it was estimated that the number of members online simultaneously during daytime and evening was on average around fifty. Besides registered members, non-members are allowed to log on to this website and read postings. As mentioned above, the majority of the members are from seafaring communities.

The main constituent part of the website is forums, the number of which keeps evolving. When new themes appear in some postings of existing forums, the managers would consider setting up new forums to accommodate these themes. Having found that many participants were discussing seafarers' salary, for example, the managers set up the forum – *Salary Guidance*. Similarly, having noticed that many were discussing bad practices of agencies, they opened the forum – *Bad Practice Exposure*. By October, 2005, the HCS website had expanded to 60 forums, which were grouped into 13 categories (see Figure 4.1 below). The current study mainly focuses on the forum: *Communication between Seafarers and Seafarer-Partners*, which is one forum of category 7 (see Figure 4.2 for all forums in category 7).

Figure 4.1 An Overview of the HCS Website Forums

	Forum Categories	No. of forums	Contents of forums
1	Newbies' Guide	1	Rules and regulations of the website
2	Capt. Guo's Mailbox	1	Capt. Guo's replies to questions regarding seafaring career
3	Accreditation	1	Organisations recognised by the HCS
4	Human Resource	10	Seafarer recruitment, job seeking, and associated issues
5	Exchange of Skills	4	Exchanging seafaring skills
6	E-market	2	Selling or buying maritime related goods
7	Relationships and Communication	3	Exchanging information regarding seafaring, relationships, and marriage
8	Seafaring Pictures	2	Pictures of ships and sea
9	Literature	3	Seafaring novels, poetry, travelogues
10	Seafaring Information	5	Shipping news, articles, and conventions; introduction of some shipping companies.
11	Maritime Training and Education Institutions	18	Information and discussions within these MET institutes
12	Shipping Companies	5	Issues related to these companies
13	Website Management	5	Issues related to the website's management

Figure 4.2 Forums in Category 7[8]

Name	Time Established
Communication among Seafarers	2003
Communication between Seafarers and SP	2003
Dating Forum	2004
Gardens for Seafarer-Wives and Children	January 2006
SPs' Club	February 2006
Ship Visiting Guidance	October 2006

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[8] Three forums in Figure 1.2 were established in 2006. Figure 1.1 is up to October of 2005 and therefore it does not contain the last three forums in Figure 1.2.

4.2 Management and functions of the HCS website

The HCS was not created from scratch by the managers. Rather, they made use of a standardised technical framework provided by a Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) service provider, from whom they rented space. As a result, the functions of the HCS are pre-defined by the technical framework, within which it is lodged and located.

Besides forums, the functions of the HCS include:

1) Sending 'private' messages. If one member wants to talk to a particular other, he/she can send 'private' messages. If the receiver is online at the same time, a box will pop up to inform the receiver that he/she receives a message. If the receiver is not online, he/she will be informed once he/she log on to the website.

2) Writing diaries. Each member is allocated an E-diary book. He/she can choose whether to write or not and whether to make his/her diary 'public' or not. Members can also comment on others' 'public' diaries. The system will send an automatic generated message to the diary writer informing him/her that his/her diary receives a comment. The writer can then check the comment.

3) Checking who is online.

4) Checking members' information, including age, gender, living place, email-box, career, 'public' diaries, posted threads, etc.

5) Checking the records of the 'Community Court'. The penalties of members' violating community rules are published on the Community Court page.

6) Entertainment, including online games, lottery, e-cards, adopting e-pets, making wishes, and virtual marriage – a fun and virtual agreement in which two members 'marry' online!

4.2.1 Ways of recognising participants' contribution

The survival of any BBS websites, to a great extent, depends on their members' participation and activity levels. For this reason, BBS websites give their members' certain kinds of recognition for their participation in terms of both quality and quantity. The ways of recognition are normally in-built into the technical framework. This is also the case for the HCS. The managers cannot create new mechanisms to reward participants' contributions. They do, however, have an operational platform,

where they can (re)define the detailed recognition rules using the pre-given mechanisms. We will look at this in detail below.

The basic ways to reward member's participation in the HCS include giving them 'community money' and 'experience points'. Participants earn their 'community money' by writing diaries and postings and staying online. For example, an individual can get one community dollar for every minute he/she spends online in the HCS. Although the reward mechanism of 'community money' is built into the technical framework, the managers are free to make the detailed operational rules, including which activities are to be rewarded and how much the reward is. This also applies to other reward mechanisms that are mentioned below. An individual's 'experience points' also depends on one's writing and the time he/she spends actually online in the HCS. The amount awarded for writing postings, however, is forum specific. For example, one participant asked in the *Newbie's Guide*:

> Why can I get 1 experience point by making a posting in some forums, while none in others?

The manager answered:

> We reward participation differently in different forums. We always encourage participants to make postings about seafaring skills. [Fieldnote, 08/05/2006]

Clearly, this response reveals the ways in which the managers attempted to steer the website's contents into seafaring matters. It also suggests that 'points' are made on the basis of managers' value judgement. However, the managers did not specify anywhere in the website the detailed rules for this. When one finishes making a posting and if this activity earns him/her a certain amount of experience points, a window will pop up telling him/her this amount. This appeared to be the only way participants learn how many experience points they can obtain for making a posting in a particular forum. There was a lack of clarity and an explicit statement about experience points.

The third kind of value participants can get is 'popularity points'. Points are earned by initiating postings. For every reply one's initiating posting attracts, one receives a certain amount of popularity points. When one receives a private message from another member, he/she can also earn a certain amount of popularity points. Thus,

one's popularity points indicate how much attention one attracts from other members. The higher one's popularity points are, the more 'popular' one is among the members.

A second layer of recognition of members' participation is a ranking system. The ranks of membership from low to high are apprentice, seaman, 3rd officer/4th engineer, 2nd officer/3rd engineer, chief officer/2nd engineer, master/chief engineer, moderator, senior member, and manager. One's rank depends on 'experience' value and the amount of 'community dollars' one has, and the number of postings that one has made. The higher the rank, the more privilege one has. For example, a 2nd officer's private message box could contain maximum 20 messages, while a master's one could contain 40. Again, it is the managers who define which rank can enjoy what kinds of privileges on the operational platform. Managers of HCS have outright power to control even though occasionally other participants raised questions.

Members can not make postings in an unconstrained manner. Individuals have a 'strength value'. Each day, this value is (re)set to 60 points for each member. Every time one logs onto the HCS, one point is deducted from the 60 points. And for every posting one makes, two points of 'strength value' are deducted. Thus, one can make at most 29 postings per day. This, probably, serves to keep members from making flooding postings[9] in order to be upgraded as quickly as possible in terms of rank. The use of 'strength points' by managers and the system regulates participation somewhat.

4.2.2 Management

The overall website is managed by the founder as the general manager and a friend who is an ex-seafarer and invests all his time in managing the website as the deputy manager. Besides defining in detail the rewarding rules, the managers appoint and dismiss moderators to manage forums, specify moderators' rights and duties, make regulations for this community, and punish those who violate regulations.

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[9] Flooding postings include postings having nothing to do with seafaring community or not relevant to the theme of the specific forum, posting the same message several times or in several forums, title-less postings, posting messages that have been posted before by others in the forum, meaningless postings

Generally, there are four types of initiating postings (or threads[10]). The first kind is red top-up postings, which are marked by red arrows on the left side of the titles of these postings[11]. They are also called pan-forum top-up postings/threads, since they are always on the top of the thread list of each forum. Only the managers have the authority to classify and set one thread as a red top-up one. Normally, these are important messages posted by the managers. The second kind is yellow (or forum) top-up postings/threads, which are marked by yellow arrows. They are forum specific and always below red ones on the list but above others. The moderators are able to set and de-select postings/threads as yellow ones. Generally, these threads are regarded as the best threads of the forum by the moderators. The third type of open postings is normal ones. Their positions in the list move depending upon when they last received a reply. When one participant contributes to one thread by making a replying posting, this thread then goes up automatically to the position just below the yellow arrow ones. Thus, for this kind of thread, those with the most recent replies appear higher in the list. The fourth kind is perceived to be high-quality postings, whose titles are marked by the word 'high-quality'. Their status is higher than normal postings but lower than top-up ones. Their positions in the list vary like normal ones. Again, it is moderators who decide which can be defined as a 'high-quality' posting/thread in the forum. Indeed moderators judge and decide the fate and labelling of members' words on a routine basis. The moderators' role is now discussed.

Each forum has its moderator(s). Any participant who wishes to be a moderator of a particular forum can put him/herself forward to the managers either through a private message or by posting a message in the forum of *Community Management Suggestions* (the 13th category in Figure 4.1). The managers then make the decision on whether to appoint this participant or not. In the forum called *Newbies' Guide*, the manager specified the conditions for applying to become a moderator of a specific forum:

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[10] A discussion thread includes the initiating posting and all the replying postings. The title and theme of one thread are defined in the initial posting. Therefore the quality of a thread depends very much on the initial posting, and the author of it takes the rewards for this thread.

[11] The first webpage of a forum is the list of the first 36 discussion thread titles. By clicking the title, one can view the detailed posting contents.

- Must be a registered member of the website

- Must be familiar with and interested in the forum; Must know how to search relevant information from the Internet; Must be able to update and increase the content of the forum

- Must be able to invest time in managing the forum, including replying to and dealing with postings on time

- Must be able to cooperate with the managers, delete or revise postings that violate community regulations, and forward the regulation breaking members into the Community Court

- Must post a message in the forum to let participants know if you will be absent for a period of time [Fieldnote, 08/11/2005]

Indeed this role specification list described quite a demanding set of tasks for would-be moderators. Nevertheless, individuals did identify themselves for this role. For example, one made a posting titled as '*Manager, I want to be a moderator*' in the forum of *Advice and Complaints to Managers*:

> ... I want to be a moderator, because I love the HCS and want to do something for it and feel attached to it. In the beginning, I just surfed here and read some postings. Later, I started replying postings. Now I initiate postings and want to be a moderator. I hope that Manager can give me the opportunity! ... [Fieldnote, 07/09/2006]

Broadly, there are two kinds of forums. One kind is technical, such as category 2, 4 and 5; the other is more general, such as category 7, 8 and 9 (see Figure 4.1). When the managers chose moderators for the first kind of forums, the first factor they considered was whether the candidates had the relevant technical expertise or not. While for the second kind, the main consideration was the candidates' dedication, familiarity with the website, and their sense of responsibility. Managers looked carefully at the applicant's levels of activity before awarding anyone this crucial role.

Once being appointed, moderators gain the following rights:

- Entitled to revise, delete, move, and top up postings in the managed forum

- Entitled to define which posting/thread is high-quality

- Entitled to have access to some internal information of the website [Extract from the forum *Newbies' Guide*, 12/10/2005]

Of course, moderators are obliged to fulfil their duties, which include:

- Visiting the website and the managed forum regularly
- Managing the postings, including revising and deleting postings
- Forwarding to the managers details of those participants who violated community regulations
- Advertising the website to relevant people around
- Forwarding to the website any maritime information one finds [Extract from the forum *Newbies' Guide*, 12/10/2005]

The most important job of a moderator is 'policing' the managed forum. The major part of this job is deleting inappropriate postings. Moderators do not receive any formal training but simply learn 'at the role'. There are numerous rules and regulations which define what kinds of postings are 'illegal' and which therefore should be deleted. In the *Newbies' Guide*, it was stated explicitly that the following kinds of posting were regarded as inappropriate and would be deleted:

- Pornographic postings
- Anti-social and anti-government postings
- Postings that advocate Taiwan, Tibetan, and Xinjiang independence
- Postings that advocate vicious religions
- Xenomania[12] postings
- Flaming (verbal abuse) postings
- Postings that verbally abuse managers and moderators
- Viciously complaining postings
- Mutual flattering, self-appreciating, but pointless postings
- Flooding postings
- Postings that violate China's Internet Management Regulation [Fieldnote, 08/11/2005]

Having deleted a posting, the moderator usually sends the poster a message informing the reason for the deletion. If the moderator thinks that the 'perpetrator' violated the above rules severely, he/she can forward the case to the managers.

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[12] Xenomania means a mania for, or an inordinate attachment to, foreign customs, institutions, manners, fashions, etc, while despising one's own national characteristics.

The managers are the judges in the *Community Court* and they punish those participants who violate community rules. Once a moderator forwarded a case to them, they take the decision as to whether and how the 'perpetrator' will be punished. The penalties include deleting membership ID forever, being banned from the community within a certain number of days, being banned from posting posts within a certain number of days, and a fine of 'experience' points. If one participant is 'convicted', the announcement of and the reason for the 'conviction' will be posted on the *Community Court* page. The rules for punishment, however, were not made explicit to participants. The only warning message posted in the *Newbies' Guide* is as follows:

> If you want to earn community dollars and experience points by making flooding or rubbish postings, you will make things much worse, for you will be severely punished, including deducting more community dollars and experience points from you than you have thereby earned, banning you from making postings for a period of time, and deletion of your ID. [Fieldnote, 15/11/2005]

It appears that members could learn more from their monitoring of the *Community Court* and punishment news than the rather brief warnings in the *Newbies' Guide*.

The technical setting of the website also warns participants not to violate the rules. When participants open the page of writing a posting, a warning message in red colour appears just below the 'Submit' button:

> Special warning: the following kinds of postings will be deleted, the author's ID and IP address[13] will be recorded, and if necessary, it will be reported to relevant authorities
>
> Any political postings
>
> Any pornographic postings
>
> Any postings that make others feel disgusting
>
> Any flaming postings
>
> Any postings that damage the unity of the country [Fieldnote, 20/01/2006]

This warning obviously tries to subject participants into self-regulation. To the majority of members, the rules and warnings are effective. Of course, there are those

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[13] An **IP address (Internet Protocol address)** is a unique number that devices use in order to identify and communicate with each other on a computer network utilizing the Internet Protocol standard (**IP**). [From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ip_address]

however who infringe them. For example, in October 2006, ten members were sentenced in the *Community Court*. Nine cases were because of flooding postings and the violators were banned from making postings for between 30 and 60 days. One case was because of posting an advertisement in the website. Figure 4.3 shows the detailed sentence message of the last case:

Figure 4.3 An Example of a Sentence Message in *Community Court*

Violator	Sentence	Judge	Sentence time	Conviction
XX	Banned from making postings in next 60 days	Manager	30.10.2006	Making advertisement

Above the moderators, the managers supervise all the forums. They are policing the website almost on a daily basis. When the general manager is working at sea and not able to log onto the website regularly, the deputy manager takes the full responsibility. Otherwise, they share the duty. Besides deleting postings and punishing those who violated community regulations, the managers also reward those who made high quality initial postings with a certain amount of community dollars and experience points. This 'bonus' is shown on the bottom of the rewarded posting to motivate others to write 'good' postings.

The managers also supervise moderators. If they note that a moderator does not delete inappropriate postings on time, they may sack the moderator. There is a moderator auditing list on the *Community Management* page, which automatically records all moderators' latest logon times. Moderators are warned if they keep absent for more than 20 days, and likely to be dismissed if absent from the website for more than 30 days. The HCS website is strict and somewhat severe in its rules and with these moderator volunteers who receive only 'status' for their moderators' work in the HCS.

4.3 The macro and micro contexts of the website's management

The general manager of HCS used to have his own personal website, which suddenly disappeared one day. It was deleted without warning by the web hosting service

provider[14]. All the documents and files that had taken the manager a considerable amount of time to collect and upload were lost without a trace. He found out later that it was an anti-government picture that ruined his personal website. The picture had been posted there by a visitor. Unfortunately, the service provider spotted it earlier than the manager did and deleted the whole website without mercy. This 'picture' event caused the general manager to design and construct the HCS from scratch with the deputy manager. In order to create more time to upload documents and files into the HCS, these two individuals made significant sacrifices and fed themselves on instant noodles for around two months during which time they worked long hours. The 'picture' event also taught the manager a powerful lesson: in order to keep the HCS website alive and intact, the policing of the website has to be vigilant and seamless.

The manager's picture story also tells us that cyberspace can be a panopticon (Foucault, 1991). All telecommunication companies, other Internet Service Providers (ISPs)[15] and Internet Content Providers (ICPs)[16] in China are held responsible by Public Security Bureau (PSB) for the information users gain access to (Barme and Ye, 1997; Chase and Mulvenon, 2002). On the one hand, ISPs are required to filter out external 'undesirable' contents, such as anti-communist-regime and materials advocating ethnic independence, and to block users from viewing 'problem' sites abroad, such as human rights websites and certain news organisations. In China, the Internet connections have two tiers: general users are connected to the first tier, which is then connected to the Internet through a few backbone networks controlled and monitored by the state (Kalathil and Boas, 2003). To connect to the outside world,

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[14] A **web hosting service** is a type of Internet hosting service that provides individuals, organizations and users with online systems for storing information, images, video, or other content accessible via the World Wide Web. Web hosts are companies that provide space on a server they own for use by their clients as well as providing Internet connectivity, typically in a data center. [From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_hosting_service]

[15] An ISP is a business or organization that sells to consumers access to the Internet and related services. [From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_service_provider]

[16] An ICP is an organization or individual that creates information, educational or entertainment content for the Internet, CD-ROMs or other software-based products. [http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia_term/0,2542,t=Internet+content+provider&i=40275,00.asp]

these national backbone networks have to pass through proxy servers[17] at the official international 'gateway'[18] (Walton, 2001). It is on this level that the 'Great Firewall' is installed and politically sensitive sites abroad are blocked (Barme and Ye, 1997; Chase and Mulvenon, 2002; Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Walton, 2001). On the other hand, ICPs are required to keep their websites uncontaminated. They are under the constant surveillance of the PSB and telecommunication governing bodies. The Ministry of Information Industry issued the *Regulations Governing Internet Information Service* and the *Regulations Governing Internet BBS Service* in 2000. In the regulations, all websites are required to delete immediately any content that is anti-social, anti-government, and anti-regime and report this to relevant governing bodies; any website that is found containing these kinds of information will be temporally or even permanently closed. To keep their business, some websites employ net censors, often called 'cleaning ladies' or 'big mamas', to monitor forums and chat rooms and remove quickly any dangerous materials (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002; Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Kluver and Banerjee, 2005). It is not surprising then that the manager's personal webpage was deleted. These regulations subject websites in China to self-discipline.

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[17] A proxy server sits between a client application, such as a Web browser, and a real server. It intercepts all requests to the real server to see if it can fulfill the requests itself. If not, it forwards the request to the real server (Walton, 2001).

[18] **Gateway** also known as application proxy, an application gateway is an application program that runs on a firewall system sitting between two networks. When a client program establishes a connection to a destination service, it connects to an application gateway, or proxy. The client then negotiates with the proxy server in order to communicate with the destination service. In effect, the proxy establishes the connection with the destination behind the firewall and acts on behalf of the client, hiding and protecting individual computers on the network behind the firewall. This creates two connections: one between the client and the proxy server and one between the proxy server and the destination. Once connected, the proxy makes all packet-forwarding decisions. Since all communication is conducted through the proxy server, computers behind the firewall are protected. While this is considered a highly secure method of firewall protection, application gateways require great memory and processor resources compared to other firewall technologies (Walton, 2001)

General Internet users certainly are in the panoptic gaze. Being denied access to some overseas websites containing politically sensitive issues, the Internet users in China are in a sense confined to purified information from the outside world. Their activities online are monitored by various bodies. The above mentioned regulations require ISPs to record users' logon time, IP addresses and user accounts. These kinds of information should be kept for 60 days and be provided to the authority when required. Similarly, ICPs, including BBS forums and chat rooms, are required to keep 60 days' record of posted information and users' IP addresses. If any unlawful material appears on their websites, ICPs should stop transmitting, keep the record, and report to the authority. Internet cafés are very popular in China. They have attracted many people without their own PCs to go in and get wired. It has been reported that many Internet café have installed a kind of security software that enables local PSB to monitor café patrons' surfing activities around the clock (Kalathil and Boas, 2003). Several sources reported that many 'cyber-dissidents' who posted and disseminated unlawful information had been arrested (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002; Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Walton, 2001).

These mechanisms construct a panopticon and subject general users to self-regulation. The substantial increase of the Internet user population in China, the ever-expanding Internet traffic, the necessity to develop the information economy, and the need to participate in the global economy make it difficult to monitor the Internet (Walton, 2001). Though people may be aware of the difficulty of effective surveillance, their awareness of the possibility of being monitored deters them from violating the regulations, as one PSB officer indicated:

> People are used to being wary, and the general sense that you are under surveillance acts as a disincentive. The key to controlling the Net in China is in managing people, and this is a process that begins the moment you purchase a modem (Barme and Ye, 1997).

As a result, an environment of self regulation and self-censorship is created in China (Kluver and Banerjee, 2005)

This wider political environment certainly shapes the management of the HCS. Being in the spotlight of the panoptic gaze and in order to avoid unnecessary troubles, the managers stipulated strict regulations and rules to control the website, as we saw in

the earlier two sections. At the same time, they employ a certain number of participants to 'discipline and punish' general users (Foucault, 1991).

The users also shape the landscape of the HCS. The forums are designed according to the characters of its users – seafarers. For example, there are two departments on ships: deck department and engine department; therefore in the category 5 (see Figure 4.1) one forum is the *Skill Exchange for Deck Department* and another forum is the *Skill Exchange for Engine Department*. When the managers notice that an issue has been raised often in a forum, they will consider the possibility of opening a new forum dedicated to this particular issue. As mentioned in the first section, the *Salary Guidance* and the *Bad Practice Exposure* are examples of this. More significantly, SPs, who were not the targeted audience when the HCS was initially set up, have colonised the website and become the enthusiastic participants.

Thus, the HCS is a cultural product. Its origin, development, and management are shaped and channelled by the macro and micro social-cultural context in which it is embedded (Castells, 1996; 2001; Hine, 2000). Having looked at the macro political environment, we will explore in more detail the micro social context of the website – the characteristics of its users (only SP participants for this study) – in the next chapter. Before that, however, one may ask: are these participants really SPs? Are the postings perhaps made up? I shall try to answer these questions in the next section.

4.4 Authenticity and Identity

To answer these questions, it would be useful to differentiate between identity play and identity performance/management. The former refers to playing identities incompatible with one's own sense of the self, for example, a student pretends to be a professor online or a man pretends to be a women. The latter refers to fulfilling one's own sense of the self by available means and is similar to 'the presentation of the self in everyday life' (Goffman, 1959).

Identity play has been reported and discussed on numerous occasions (e.g. Danet, 1998; Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1995); and it is also one of the central issues for the research of online cultures. Turkle (1995; 1997) argues that the Internet provides an

identity lab, where people can try on and play with different identities. Under certain circumstances, the argument has its ground. Protected by anonymity and disembodiment online, some people assume identities that are incompatible with their own sense of the self. Identity play, however, is not the universal motivation or even the primary use for participants on the Internet. More often than not, as noted by Castells (2001), Internet users present their offline selves online. Many online research studies show that online identities of those under research tended to be a continuative of their offline ones (e.g. Baym, 1998; Fox and Roberts, 1999; Hardey, 2002a; Miller and Slater, 2000). Even in Multi-User Domains (MUDs), which Turkle's work focused on, users do not necessarily play with identities (Kendall, 2002).

Before discussing identities online the HCS, I shall look into the authenticity of the postings first. Many SP users thought that in the HCS they could take off masks which they were wearing in the offline world and release their otherwise deeply buried emotions. They appeared to believe that most postings in the HCS reflected others' real experiences rather than being made up. There are several reasons for them to believe so. Firstly, SPs believed in the 'truth' of the postings because they resonated with their own experiences. Blue-Elf, a 27-year-old post-graduate student, explained:

> Q: According to what do you feel so?
>
> A: I feel that these postings are identical to my feelings. In other words, I can feel that kind of feelings in the postings. I also have these feelings. So I think that they should be real.

Though some informants did not explicitly say that they had had similar feelings as those described in the postings, they implied this. Golden-Eye, a 33-year-old secretary, for example, believed that without SPs' experiences one would not be able to write such postings as appeared in the HCS:

> Q: To what extent do you think postings in this website are real?
>
> A: I feel ... those without real experiences they cannot make up these postings. Only those with these kinds of feelings can write such words. After all, we are not playwrights. Even if s/he is a playwright, s/he has to have a first hand taste of seafarer-partners' life in order to write a play about seafarer-partners.

Secondly, belief in accuracy of postings occurred because some informants knew several other SP users both online and offline. According to their knowledge, there was no discrepancy between these SP users' online and their offline activities:

Q: Why do you think that most are real?

A: Because I am familiar with some of them. Some are my boyfriends' classmates' girlfriends, and some are around me. I know them. So I feel that they are real. [Rainbow, an unmarried SP]

Thirdly, informants' impression of genuineness of postings was because of the audience and purpose of the website. Lala, for example, felt that this website was place for SPs and seafarers to voice their concerns and share their happiness and therefore it was pointless to make up postings:

I believe that all postings here are genuine, because this is the big family for seafarers and seafarer-partners and no one will lie. The reasons for posting here are because they meet some problems or have some happy things to share. Therefore I believe [that they are genuine].

Fourthly, they themselves had always been 'real' online and therefore they perceived that others would do the same. Informants seemed very reluctant to consider any falsity, as Lovely-Dolphin, a 24-year-old unmarried SP, explained:

I always feel that their postings are genuine, because I am real in this website.

There appears to be a general culture in the HCS that SP participants do not make things up in their writings and the writings reflect their everyday experiences. For relative new comers, they would soon perceive this culture. One SP wrote in her diary:

I like this website more and more. I told my colleague that the reason for me to like it is because the participants here are lovely. In the beginning, I held an onlooker's attitude. Now I feel that people here are very open and revealing. They are very open and never hesitate to say....In real life, there are too much hypocrisy and lies. [Fieldnote, 29/12/2005]

The reason for her to believe so might be due to one or several of the above mentioned points. This feeling or belief encourages SP participants to open themselves, which in turn contributes to formulating this particular culture.

Of course, no informants said that they believed everything that they read without any reservations at all. They differentiated the 'true' and the 'accurate', and one informant

Yangtze-Girl, a 24-year-old and unmarried SP, actually quantified her estimate of truth and accuracy. Taking the following interview extract as an example:

Q: To what extent do you think the postings in this website are true?

A: It should be 80%.

Q: How about the other 20%?

A: It is not unreal. It is definitely that there is exaggeration. For example, when I wrote my feelings of visiting the ship or some other things, my passion was not that high. It seemed that in order to infect others, I exaggerated my feeling of looking forward to visiting the ship. I exaggerated my actual expectation which was 50% into 80%.

So Yangtze-Girl performed her feelings somewhat. Though Yangtze-Girl thought that only 80 percent of postings were true, she said that the other 20 percent were actually not unreal. Logically, this may seem paradoxical. However, in fact, Yangtze-Girl's answer suggests that the postings were exaggerated accounts drawn from real experiences but not presented accurately. This inaccuracy was from exaggeration. Yangtze-Girl's words also indicate that she was engaged in identity management online. This is very similar to that in the offline world, where we can either exaggerate or downplay our thoughts and feelings to present a desirable self. Several other informants gave accounts of inaccuracy caused by bias, for example:

Q: How about that 10%, why in your opinion they are not real?

A: For example, some postings saying that seafarers are not faithful. I think that this is partial. It is unlikely that everybody is like this. [Mary, a 24-year-old student]

Mary seemed to suggest that some postings were just personal opinions and did not reflect the exact reality. This can also be regarded as identity management – ignoring the full picture in order to make one's case stronger. Yet personal opinions are based on personal perceptions or experiences. No matter how inaccurate they are, they are not made up. They can only be 'partial' or exaggerated. It seems safe to say that the informants regarded the postings as deriving from real experiences.

Having discussed the authenticity of postings, I shall turn to the topic of participants' identity. From users' registered personal information, it was difficult to tell whether this information was factually correct or not. In some rare cases, this biographical information was obviously misleading. For example, some users registered their age as below ten or above one hundred; and some did not identify their gender. Convenience may be one reason for giving wrong information. The system provides

options to choose from and users may choose a convenient box to tick or complete rather than an accurate one. Caution may be another reason why users provided incomplete data, since all of us have the tendency to protect our privacy, particularly when first entering a new social domain.

It was also difficult to tell whether or not one particular participant used several user identities (IDs). At least, several users had more than one ID. For example, one SP user explicitly told readers that she was using a different ID in an initial posting titled, '*Should we terminate the relationship?*' Before describing her situation and asking others whether she should terminate her relationship with a seafarer or not, she stated:

> I have been registered with this website for several months. Recently, I got frustrated by one thing. But I do not want to use my former ID. So I registered this one. If using the former one, I would feel uncomfortable since it would make me feel as if I were disclose things to friends that I do not want them to know... [Fieldnote, 05/12/2005]

This SP assumed another identity here. The reason to do so was to achieve a high level of anonymity. She made herself a stranger to others in order to be able to reveal her innermost story without recognition. To what extent 'identity switching' occurred in HCS was difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, two years' online observation suggested that the majority of the active participants revealed both trivial things and very deep and emotional feelings and experiences under the same ID. This may indicate that 'identity switching' was not very popular in the HCS.

'Identity switching', however, seems to be identity management instead of identity play or experiment. With regard to SPs, their online identity remains SPs rather than something else that is unavailable to them offline and incompatible with their own sense of the self. A person normally has several roles. A female teacher, for example, can be a wife, a mother and a daughter and all these are her identities. However, in one particular context, the school for example, the identity that matters under normal circumstances is teacher rather than others. Similarly, the relevant identity for SPs in the HCS is SP, be they teachers, mothers, or daughters. It may be the case that a 30 year old teacher SP registered herself as a 100 year old genderless doctor. The major part of her identity performance is writing postings and diaries, which are mainly about issues related to SPs, instead of other roles. The culture of the HCS implicitly encourages her to disclosure her inner feelings and emotional tensions associated with

being a SP. As discussed above, the informants believed that the majority of postings were genuine and drawn from real experiences. Of course, one SP may have two or several IDs and her online personae may reveal different things, all these things however are likely to be from her experiences of being a SP. Again, she does not divert to other identities other than that of a SP. From the viewpoint of the managing SP, she does not pretend to be anybody other than the SP self. She only wants to be more anonymous in order to be comfortable to reveal private issues. Similarly, according to the informants' perception, it seems that no non-SPs pretended to be SPs in the HCS, for the informants perceived the postings were drawn from real experiences. Therefore, even if one SP assumes several IDs in the HCS, she is more likely to perform herself, instead of pretending to be somebody else.

Following Castells (2001) and Miller and Slater (2000), it seems that the online identities of SP participants in the HCS are largely compatible with their offline ones. They do not appear to engage in playing identities not available to them offline, although this can never be absolutely certain.

Chapter 5 Predicaments of Seafarer-Partners

In their writings in the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* (HCS) and during the interviews, seafarer-partners (SPs) revealed some of the predicaments that they faced in everyday life. The data suggest that it is these problems, among other things, that motivate SPs to participate in the HCS in order to vent their complaints and seek support. To understand these predicaments, then, would help us to make sense of SPs' usage of the website. Thus, this chapter aims to explore and provide an account of problems that SPs experienced and mentioned. The material used is derived from online observational data and interview data. In the first section, we will examine emotional loneliness that SP participants are likely to endure when their beloved are absent. The second section focuses on SPs' negative perceptions of how non-seafaring people see them. Following that, the third section shows that SPs' parents and kin may be against their relationships with seafarers. The last section suggests that SP participants are likely to suffer from social isolation.

5.1 Emotional loneliness

The painful experience that SPs are most likely to suffer is emotional loneliness. The latter, according to Weiss (1973), is the subjective response to a long-term separation from or loss of the person to whom one is emotionally attached. Seafaring inevitably involves long-term separation between seafaring couples, which may cause, among others things, emotional isolation for SPs. Such a kind of loneliness can present itself in several forms: longing, feelings of emptiness, complaining of seafarers' inability to provide emotional support and worrying.

Longing was the most visible theme in the postings and diary entries on the website. 'It is not lonely to be one person alone; it is lonely to be longing for a person.' This poignant remark was one SP's signature in the website. It reveals the major cause of loneliness – longing, which SPs have to face when seafarers are absent. Beck (1992) argues that it is the fear of agonising loneliness more than anything else that motivates people to enter and stay in marriage. If this is true, then SPs escape from that threatening loneliness only to embracing a worse version of it once again. Being in a relationship, yet most of the time they are not together; being assigned the 'single

status' temporarily, yet they can not be single. A SP described this ambivalent situation as such:

> A single person can live as others and lead a beautiful life. But I am in a predicament: behind the appearance of being single, you [the partner away at sea] are in my mind. Therefore, I cannot live as a single person. But the reality is that nor can I enjoy the shared life of a couple. I fall in between. [Fieldnote, 18/12/05]

In contrast to Lash's (2001) argument that modern technological forms of life speeds up time, the 'in-between' situation in a sense 'freezes' time for SPs. Chinese seafarers and other seafarers from developing countries as well usually sign a one year sailing contract. In this one year, SPs' memory of being together may have no way to update itself. It is stopped and 'frozen'. One SP understood this 'frozen' time as such:

> Whereas the basic unit of time for others is day, for us it is year. While others say what happened to their husbands yesterday, we discuss what happened to him [when he was home on leave] last year. [Fieldnote, 28/12/2005]

What is left in the separation year is probably memory and longing, which are presumably mutually reinforcing and thus keeps bubbling to the surface for SPs. One SP wrote:

> Busy or idle, in the days of being alone, longing keeps flowering! [Fieldnote, 09/05/06]

Modern sexual relationships tend to be characterised by intimacy (Giddens, 1992). Within the relationship, both parties provide with each other emotional warmth and satisfy each others' emotional and sexual needs. One is the significant other for the other. They are mutually dependent and attached to each other. When seafarers leave home for ships, however, SPs lose their intimate companions temporarily. This loss makes SPs feel that their lives suddenly become empty. For new SPs, presumably, this emptiness seems to be felt strongly. Two interviewees who were new SPs reported:

> [M]y boyfriend had been with me for a while and then he suddenly went onboard. I suddenly felt that my life had become empty. [Snow]

> My husband went onboard the ship shortly after we established our relationship. I suddenly felt empty. [Helena]

The temporary loss also makes it difficult for SPs to share their practical and emotional burdens and happiness with their seafarers. As a result, some SPs in the HCS complained of seafarers' inability to provide emotional support. For example, two SPs wrote:

> When I feel bad and want to talk to you, your mobile has no signal; when I know from news that accidents happened at sea, it is an ordeal to hear nothing from you; when something happens home and needs your opinions, you are not here...[Fieldnote, 30/11/2005]

> I feel so bad these days that I hope that you can give me some consolation. But what I face is always silence ... [Fieldnote, 10/01/2006]

Being attached to seafarers, seafarer-partners are concerned about their safety. Working and living on ships, seafarers are at the mercy of the sea, which is perceived as mysterious, volatile and dangerous. Thus, seafaring careers are regarded as inherently risky. No matter whether this perception is correct or not, it can fill seafarer-partners with concerns for their partners' safety. One SP wrote:

> It is true that modern technology and safety standards enable ships to outride storms at sea. However, out on the vast ocean and being left high and dry, who can guarantee 100% safety of ships? [I am] worrying and fearing for his safety everyday. [I am] checking the situation of his ship everyday. Without exaggeration, this is an unbearable ordeal! [Fieldnote, 26/11/2005]

For the partners of new seafarers, the worrying manifested itself even stronger, since they had not experienced separations and were thus ill-prepared for this. Further, seafaring is a 'secluded' career in the sense that it takes place at sea and in enclosed ports, which are inaccessible to the eyes of the wider population. Inexperienced SPs thus might know very little about seafaring. The sudden 'disappearance' of seafarers for the first time into an unknown and unreachable world may make their young partners worried. With no knowledge of seafaring, no communication, and no information, inexperienced SPs remain in dark. In this situation, they are more worried. Two seafarer-partners recounted their experiences:

> [H]e went to the sea for the first time. I could not get any of his information and was worried. [Rain]

After he left, I did not get any of his information for two months. I was very anxious. [Spring]

Safety concerns also have another consequence. Thomas (2003) found that British seafarers' wives tried not to inform their husbands any negative news or event while they were at sea in case they might become unnecessarily concerned. SPs in this study showed a similar attitude. They feared that if they revealed unpleasant news to their partners at sea, their partners would be overburdened with worries and thus become more vulnerable to harsh working conditions onboard. As a result, they kept such news to themselves. This was certainly a hard decision, for the burden was often so heavy that they wanted somebody to share it with them. Partners considered carefully what information to share with their seafarers as these examples show:

My husband's ship will come back to Dalian [where this SP lives]. I know his job is hard and therefore I am wondering whether I should complain my difficulties to him or not. [Fieldnote 26/12/2005]

Every time when our baby or myself is ill, I try my best not to let him know for fear that he may worry. [Fieldnote, 26/12/2005]

Thus, even when they were able to communicate with each other, SPs might still not be able to share their concerns with their seafarers.

The emotional loneliness arguably is exacerbated by the fact that SPs have very little information about their seafarers once they are at sea. On the one hand, SPs know very little of living and working conditions at sea. In the sense, they are ill-informed of the seafaring profession. As we just mentioned, seafaring job is 'secluded' from the gaze of the general public. It is true that visiting ships while ships are in Chinese ports is popular among Chinese SPs. A few days, or even worse, a few hours, arguably, can hardly give them a satisfactory picture of what a seafarers' job entails. Sailing with a husband, though not completely impossible, is still a dream for the vast majority of Chinese SPs (see chapter 1). Maybe for this reason, almost all informants of this study mentioned that they did not know much of their partners' job. On the other hand, SPs can hardly have any idea of where their seafarers are most of the time, since communication from sea to shore is far from easy (Alderton *et al.*, 2004; Kahveci,

2007a; 2007b; Thomas, 2003). Thus, seafarers are not just absent; they 'vanish' and 'disappear' from SPs' worlds temporarily.

The feeling of loneliness and lack of communication make SPs treasure every trace of information they can get about their beloved seafarers. In the diary space, some SPs expressed their excitement after receiving a long-distance phone-call or a letter or an email. For example, one wrote after she had received a phone-call from her boyfriend:

> He phoned me a moment ago, really! ... ...Oh, I cannot believe it. It was him. It's really beyond my dream. How excited I was. [Fieldnote, 11-08-2005]

As we have mentioned, however, that there is no convenient and cheap communication means between ships and home. More often than not, therefore, SPs were complaining that they had not received any phone-calls for a long time. Online fieldwork witnessed many examples like the one presented below:

> One SP: Why has not my partner made a phone-call? ... Having waited for dozens of days, I am worrying.

> Another SP: Me too! I have not received a call for more than forty days. [Fieldnote, 12/12/2005]

As a result, a phone-call from the seafarers is important and being looked forward to. Yangtze-Girl said in the interview:

> Because their [non-SPs] husbands are around everyday, they cannot understand how important a phone-call [from the husband] is.

Since a phone-call is so important, SPs take every possible measure to make sure that they do not miss any from their partners. Many SPs disclosed that they dared not to switch off their mobiles or to forget to take mobiles with them. One wrote:

> Actually I know that the radiation from the mobile is not good for health. But when he is away, I am afraid of missing his phone-calls and therefore I keep it close to me around the clock. [Fieldnote, 19/03/2006]

5.2 Stigmatised by others

Of course, SPs do not live in a one- or two-person world. In every day lives, they interact with people around them. Sometimes, such interactions make SPs feel stigmatised.

The most common occasion when SPs feel victimised is when others gossip about seafarers' infidelity. Most people know that seafarers leave home for a long time for the job; and that during this time, seafarers have no sexual contacts with their partners and they go to foreign ports. This knowledge leads to a common perception about seafarers – seafarers are promiscuous and they have girls in every port. This perception appears to be deep-seated and cut across the whole world, for past research studies on British seafaring families (Thomas, 2003), Indian ones (Sampson, 2005) and Australian ones (Foster and Cacioppe, 1986) reported the same thing. The presence of a SP may invoke other people's discussing of or even joking about this. One SP complained in one of her diary entries:

> At lunch time, my colleagues talked about relationships. They said that the relationship would meet problems if two persons are separated for a long time. I knew that they were insinuating me and my seafarer boyfriend... They said that seafarers were not reliable. I have not seen him [her boyfriend] for eleven months and have been feeling bad for that. Their words made me feel worse... [Fieldnote, 06/01/2006]

It seemed that another SP had been encountering such a problem quite often. She was furious about this and wrote:

> There are lots of curious people around. [They keep asking:] what is your husband job? I told them: a seafarer. Then they would look at me in a strange way. I do not mind how they think of me since they do not know much of seafaring ...But one thing makes me angry. I have been working in this company for three years ... and said good-bye to many colleagues. But the fact that my partner is a seafarer has never failed to evoke their curiosity and discussions about seafarers' infidelity... [Fieldnote 28/04/2006]

Though people do not know much of seafarers, they tend to associate seafarers with high incomes. When SPs told others that their partners are seafarers, the common response from others was said to be that seafarers earn lots of money. For example, one interviewee said:

> For many people, once they know that we are married to seafarers, their first response would be saying that seafarers earn lots of money. [Golden-Eye]

From this common response, some SPs perceived a connotation: marry for money. One SP complained:

> When others ask me about my partner's career, I say that he is a seafarer. They would

immediately respond that you are rich ... If our aim were really their money, why would we suffer the agony of separation, after all there are lot of rich men ashore. [Fieldnote, 19/05/2006]

This SP clearly felt very bad at others' response. They, in her view, insulted her and her sacrifice for love. She cannot, however, change others' perception.

Further, some SPs felt that others pity them. Being alone most of the time, SPs had to cope with many tasks single-handedly, while other women had their husbands or boyfriends' help. This sometimes attracted others' sympathetic eyes and such sympathy was not always welcome. One SP felt bad about this:

It is the end of the year. Our company provides each of us lots of things to celebrate the New Year[19]. My colleagues rang their husbands to come to give them a hand, while I could not. They looked at me with pity when I was loading and lashing these things on my bike alone and with great difficulties... This was hard to bear. I do not want others to pity me! [Fieldnote, 25/01/2006]

Finally, people around were said to occasionally misinterpret SPs' motivations when communicating with the opposite sex. One seafarer' wife complained:

I am a seafarer's wife. Because my husband is not home most of the time, many people think that I cannot bear the loneliness. This brings me lots of pressure in the work. As a leader, I have to talk to and discuss with colleagues quite often. This makes others suspicious of my motivation, which is awkward for me... [Fieldnote, 01/10/2006]

These words suggest that this SP felt humiliated by others' inaccurate perceptions of her motivation when talking with colleagues. Thomas' (2003) study shows that the temporally 'single status' of British SPs had double effects on them. On the one hand, they might fear unwanted attention from men who perceived them as single; on the other, they felt being regarded as 'sexual predator' by coupled women. Similarly, it appears that the above SP's discussions with colleagues were interpreted by others to be out of loneliness. Flying-Fish, who had been married for twelve years, gave another account:

There are more things that I need to pay attention to, especially interactions with the

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[19] It is a common practice in China for companies to buy for and distribute to their employees some goods, such as food and drinks, to celebrate New Year.

other sex. Once they know that you are a seafarer's wife, they would ... they would be more likely to think in that way. In order to maintain a seafarer's partner's reputation, I have to be more careful.

Again, it seems that SPs' behaviours towards the other sex could be easily misinterpreted by others. For this, they felt stigmatised but helpless.

The four elements discussed so far can be combined together. Separation, loneliness, money and promiscuous partners, these may stir up people's imagination and curiosity when there is a SP around. Others may not enquire or discuss SPs' lifestyle directly in front of a SP. They can, however, do it indirectly. Another married SP seems to have experienced various kinds of attentions from others:

> As a special group, we always live a different life-style. Around us, people are observing and guessing our lives with various eyes and attitudes: envy, sympathy, suspicion, and even pity! [Breeze]

The SP identity thus seems likely to attract others' intrusive attention. Some envy SPs' having money; some sympathise and feel sorry for SPs' sufferings; and some suspect SPs' motivation for entering relationships with seafarers.

The above SPs' words also suggest that some of them become sensitive towards their surroundings. On the one hand, SPs may be aware that they are different; and that as a result their different private lives are likely to attract others' attentions and speculations. On the other hand, knowing this makes SPs sensitive towards other's attitudes and behaviours towards them. The sensitivity leads some SPs to feel that the 'small talk' of familiar others about seafarers is intrusive. For example, one SP wrote:

> I used to be a very social person and liked to join in group activities. Now, I do not like going out after my husband left. No matter where I go, there are always people asking: how long has your husband been away and when will he come back? If I say that he has just left, others would show sympathy: your husband is good in all other respects but too far away from you. If I say that it has been a long time, they would say: he has not come back for so long! Some familiar colleagues and neighbours have never been tired of making such inquiries... [Fieldnote, 08/01/2006]

It appears that others' common questions and 'concerns' made this SP feel stigmatised. To avoid the awkwardness, she chose self-seclusion. Similarly, another SP wished to go to a new place in order to avoid other's intrusive talks:

The women in my office are the kind of people who gloat over others' misfortunes. They make jokes about me, as if my loneliness can remind them of their happiness... I want to go to a new place where people pay attention to their job instead of others' private lives. [Fieldnote, 31/12/2005]

5.3 Objection from family members

On top of stigmatisation, the relationship with a seafarer may cause family members' 'natural objections'. Although arranged marriage in China, for most people, is now a thing of the past, this does not mean that family members have no say in relationship or marital partner choice. According to the China Academy of Social Sciences' 1991 survey, 99.40 percent in cities and 98.56 percent in rural areas of China females could choose their marriage partners independently (Shan, 2004). However, according to the survey of 'The Contemporary Female Status', most Chinese females' free marriage is realised under the precondition that family members are not against it (Shan, 2004). Similarly, Leonard (1980) noticed that parents, kin, and peer groups could have a big influence in marital partner choice in Britain. Therefore, a relationship without the consent of family members is always under pressure. Marrying a seafarer means bearing the family burden alone for most of the time, which may well cause parents' concerns and objections. Two SPs mentioned:

It is quite natural that my family members are not happy with my choosing of a seafarer. [Yangtze-Girl]

My elder sister told me a few days ago that love is not everything. She asked me which one I would choose: family or him. I said 'him' to myself but not to my sister. I knew that had I said that to her she would give me a lecture. [Fieldnote, 16/12/2005]

Postings in the HCS suggest that many SPs' parents, siblings, and bosom friends are not happy about their relationships with seafarers.

5.4 Social isolation

Apart from emotional loneliness, Weiss (1973) identifies another kind of loneliness – social isolation, which is due to an inadequacy of social networks. Though not uprooted from their everyday social grounds, some SPs may withdraw from the wider

social network into a self-confined world to avoid others' intrusive prying, as have shown in section 5.2.

Further, the longing for their absent partners cause SPs to become sensitive to other couples' togetherness. Seeing others being together or even hearing talk about husbands can easily remind SPs of their lonely situation. For example, one SP wrote:

> One day, it was snowing, some couples were sharing an umbrella, clinging together and talking to each other intimately. The feeling of loneliness suddenly rose from deep in my heart. [Fieldnote, 18/01/2006]

This sensitivity equally forces some SPs to withdraw from social activities. Two SPs complained in the HCS:

> In those days when you are away, I do not even want to go out. I fear of going to busy places, where the hurly-burly makes my loneliness and sadness prominent... [Fieldnote, 31/12/2005]

> When I go out with other women, their talk always revolves around their husbands ... ... I don't have a husband at home. Being with them makes me feel the pain of my loneliness more sharply. So, normally, I do not go out. Instead, I stay home cooking and surfing the Internet... [Fieldnote, 08/01/2006]

Being in an 'in-between' situation, many SPs tend to set themselves apart from others who are together with their husbands or boyfriends. One SP wrote in her diary entry:

> A colleague just invited me to her house for dinner, but I declined. All others are in pairs ... I do not want to join them. [Since] my boyfriend is not around, I do not want to go anywhere but stay home to watch telly. [Fieldnote, 15.01/06]

These words indicate that when alone she did not want to be involved in situations for couples. Besides being reminded of the lonely state, SPs may feel awkward to have to mix with seemingly happy couples.

While some SPs have bosom friends, with whom they can share their ups and downs, many SPs reported feeling that their non-seafaring friends could not empathise with their feelings and situations. Seafarers' long absence gives SPs different experiences compared with those whose partners work onshore. Many informants in this study

reported that conversations with non-seafaring friends could not 'go deep' and 'get close to the heart'. As one married SP explained:

> [T]hey [non-SP friends] have little idea about seafarers; they cannot empathise with seafarer-wives' feelings! Even though we talk, the conversations can never go as deep as I wish. Moreover, there are many things that they do not understand. I have to explain to them over and over again. It is tiresome. I cannot find resonance. [Rose]

Another interviewee, who was a student, was afraid that revealing too much grievance might be regarded as 'making a fuss over an imaginary illness' by her friends and therefore make them impatient. She therefore 'edited' her expressions and showing of feelings:

> My boyfriend is a seafarer and I may feel lonely everyday. But I cannot complain everyday about this. Otherwise, I feel that my friends would feel impatient...Too much grievance gives people the feeling that I am making a fuss over an imaginary illness. [Lily]

In a similar vein, British seafarers' wives in Thomas's (2003) research and Australian seafarers' wives in Foster and Cacioppe's (1986) study believed that only people with similar experiences could understand their feelings and therefore expressed their desire to meet and socialise with other SPs. They were, however, geographically separated and could hardly have any contact with each other (Thomas, 2003). In China, there are seafaring families living in 'Seafaring Villages' constructed in major port cities by shipping companies. There are also 'seafarer wife committees' and 'seafarer wife stations' to organise mutual support for China Ocean Shipping Company's (COSCO) seafaring families (Thomas *et al.*, 2003). These services are diminishing however (for details, see section 1.1). Moreover, they only target married SPs and are not for the new generation of Chinese SPs. It is not surprising then, that among the thirty interviewees only one (who has been married for sixteen years) lives in a 'Seafaring Village'. Maybe for this reason, Smiling-Face, a seafarer' wife who had been married for three years, stated,

> I had wondered whether there were [other seafarers] or not [in this world]...In the whole society, I felt that seafarers are so scarce that they can be neglected.

We should note that Smiling-Face lived in the biggest Chinese port city – Shanghai, where one major maritime university, one maritime school, and the top three Chinese container lines are located.

It is a tradition for Chinese SPs to visit their partners' ships while they are in Chinese ports. On these occasions, SPs from different places are able to meet and establish contact with each other, for example, Flying-Fish said:

> Normally, I would meet them [other SPs] on the way visiting the same ship. Then I know that she is the wife of Captain and she is the wife of the Chief. After several times, we would be familiar with each other. Then we would chat what happened to them on the ship and what she takes with her.

Geographical separation, nevertheless, constituted a barrier for developing close relationships. Flying-Fish continued:

> [But], we do not have time to develop relationship. We only meet on the way to visit the ship and have a little chat.

Another informant who also had opportunities to visit ships and to meet other SPs expressed the same view. Thus, it seems difficult for young generation of Chinese SPs to communicate with each other and to share their experiences.

We have examined the predicaments that Chinese seafarer-partners have to face in their everyday lives. Seafarers are absent; yet in their absence their presence is strongly felt as a strong shadow cast over a relationship. In the shadow of each seafarer-partners' problem, there is the presence of seafarers. Arguably, it is seafarers' absence that makes their presence even more prominent in seafarer-partners' consciousness. Only during the seafarers' long absence, do SPs experience longing, worrying, and feeling of emptiness. The longer the absence is and the longer there is no communication, the more SPs long for their beloved and become worried. It is seafarers' absence that makes other people 'concerned' about SPs, which in turn leads SPs to feel stigmatised. Moreover, SPs may become sensitive to others' attention and conscious of their lonely situation. Even others' togetherness and seeming happiness remind SPs of their absent seafarers. The social interactions and even non-interaction encounters, then, bring to the fore for SPs the presence of absent seafarers. For this reason, some of them tend to withdraw into the self world, which inevitably causes social isolation. Even worse, SPs' close non-seafaring friends may not be able to share their ups and downs. On the other hand, although they may wish to communicate with other SPs, geographic separation nevertheless constitutes a huge barrier.

Chapter 6 Participation and Empowerment in the Generalised Relationship

In section 2.3, we saw that Internet use can be emancipatory in several respects. This theme will be explored in the context of seafarer-partners' (SPs) usage of the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* (HCS) in this and the next chapter, where we will discuss the ways in which SPs participate in the HCS and in what respects their participation help them to cope with the difficulties identified in Chapter 5. The materials used are from sampled threads, interviews data, and observational fieldnotes. This chapter only focuses on SPs' participation in the public space of the HCS. By public space, I mean those forums and the public diary space that are open and accessible to every participant. The next chapter will turn to activities in private domains, such as private messages and other private settings. In the public space, every participant is able to interact with every other participant. This, theoretically, results in an all-to-all relationship. In other words, the relationship involved is more likely to be generalised. Thus, I refer to this unspecific and impersonal relationship as the generalised relationship[20].

Markham (1998) notes that Internet users experience computer-mediated communication along a continuum: some treat it as an instrumental tool for communication and information gathering; some see it as a sociable place to be with others; and others regard it as a way of being and performing the 'authentic' self. Markham's analysis is useful in the present study. In 'doing' the generalised relationship, SPs also seem to participate in the HCS in these three ways: seeking information, enjoying each other's company, and revealing their feelings, frustrations, and reflections. The first section of this chapter will investigate what kinds of information SPs can obtain for the HCS and how this contributes to their empowerment. The second section focuses on SPs' emotional engagement in the HCS and examines in what sense this is empowering for SPs. In the third section, we will see that SPs also provide each other with company. The last section discusses the

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[20] In the public domain, SPs also did personal relationships, as we will see in the next chapter. For convenience of analysis, however, I conceptually separate the generalized relationship and personal relationships here, and in this chapter, I only discuss the former.

generalised relationships involved in the online activities described in the three earlier sections.

6.1 Informational support

One of the empowering potentials of the Internet is that it provides a wide variety of information (for a detailed discussion, see sub-section 2.4.2). It makes its users more informed in various respects. For example, medical research studies suggested that some patients who used the Internet to search and share medical information became health knowledge consumers and even producers (Hardey, 2001; 2002b). Such studies also pointed out that patients could now use health information acquired from the Internet to negotiate treatments with doctors (Hardey, 2001; Nettleton *et al.*, 2004). This, arguably, gave patients a sense of control over their treatment. In a similar vein, the HCS provides SPs with some information which they may not find from other sources and which enables them to gain certain control over their lives. We will discuss this in the sub-sections which follow.

6.1.1 Information about life at sea

When seafarers are at sea, seafaring couples live in different tempo-spatial zones for a long period. As a result, SPs may not know how seafarers work and what they experience at sea; they do not know what their partners are doing; they may have no idea of where their beloved are – which ocean or port they are heading to; and it is difficult for SPs to predict when they can receive a phone-call to bridge the enormous distance. In a sense, SPs are in the dark and their beloved are out of touch. There is very little certainty for SPs and they have little sense of control regarding one part of their lives – the part shared with seafarers. As human beings, however, we need to have a sense of control, even if the latter is just a constructed illusion (Taylor, 1989); we do not like being kept in the dark; we want things predictable and decidable so we can plan our lives accordingly, rather than being uncertain and indefinable (Bauman, 1978), for uncertainty may create worry and apprehension (Hogben, 2006).

In this context, the HCS serves as a valuable source for SPs to gain a certain amount of control. They are able to acquire information from experienced SPs and even seafarer participants regarding routes and durations of the different voyages. Rainbow, an unmarried SP, for example, stated:

> I could ask questions in this website, for example I knew little about the route his ship took. Old and experienced SPs could give me answers, for example, how long it would take for him to come back. I feel that in this respect, I got lots of help.

The movement of her boyfriend's ship thus became roughly imaginable for Rainbow. This might enable her to predict when she could expect a phone-call and when her boyfriend could come back to a Chinese port. As a result, Rainbow was to an extent liberated from her ignorance and the associated uncertainty.

Similarly, during the online fieldwork, it was observed that some SPs made postings asking for details of shipping companies' websites and/or other contact details in order to check the positions and movement of their partners' ships. For example, one wrote:

> Sisters, does anyone know the website of X shipping company? I want to check the movement of my boyfriend's ship. It would be very convenient, if I can get it.... [Fieldnote, 20/03/2007]

In the randomly sampled postings used for analysis, one SP asked how many days of leave a seafarer can have in a year. The replies arguably served a similar function: providing the SP with a sense of certainty regarding how many days she could expect to be together with her boyfriend. Thus factual informational exchange is a common feature of postings.

Further, the HCS provides materials for SPs to imagine the life at sea. Modern life has long been teemed with various media, such as books, radio, and TV, which help to make 'culture-at-a-distance' and 'life-at-a-distance' visible and accessible (Lash, 2001). Yet, these media seldom pay attention to seafarers. Perhaps, the only time that seafarers are in the spotlight is when a sea disaster happens. Seafarers' lives thus mainly remain at an inaccessible distance to others. The Internet, however, as Tabbi (1997) has suggested, enables and encourages ordinary people to create their own discourse. Similarly, seafarers are able to write their own stories in the HCS. Though the stories may not attract attention from non-seafaring people, they help SP participants to discover the less visible parts of their partners' life. One informant stated:

> On the Internet, [we] can know more of their life, because their life can be depicted genuinely here, for example, when seafarers come back [from sea], they can write [their

life at sea in this website]. [Crystal-Heart]

Not only seafarers, but also experienced SPs who had the opportunity to visit ships, wrote postings here about seafarers' lives and working conditions. Such descriptive texts contribute to fill the blanks for young and inexperienced SPs, and to a certain extent emancipate them from their former situation of unknown and ill-informed. Arguably, this enables SPs to feel and imagine a sense of being in touch with their beloved.

6.1.2 Information about communication

SPs repeatedly expressed their desire to know where their beloved were, what they were doing, and when they were able to make a phone-call. Moreover, they were constantly hoping that they would receive a call from their beloved in order to bridge the distance that separated them. As a result, many SPs inquired about cheap and convenient means of communication between the shore and the sea. Smiling-Face mentioned this in the interview:

> Some beginners ask about basic knowledge, such as communication between the shore and the sea. I replied a lot, since I am experienced.

This indicates that older and experienced SPs, like Smiling-Face who had been married for three years, are willing to give information regarding seafarers' working and ways of communication.

In a similar vein, SP participants also asked for guidance about visiting ships while their partners' ships were in Chinese ports. The latter is common among Chinese SPs. Visiting ships may entail travelling to an unfamiliar city, searching for a remote port, and going through various formalities. For some SPs, especially relatively new ones, it is not an easy task. Many SP participants made postings in the forum of *Communication between Seafarers and Seafarer-Partners* asking about issues relating to ship visits, such as which route and which form of transportation they should take to get to the port city, how they could get to the port, and what kind of documents they should take to get through those necessary formalities. Having found that this was one of the main themes in the communication forum, in the summer of 2006, the manager(s) set up a new forum – *Ship Visiting Guidance*. Such information arguably eliminates some uncertainties of the journey for visiting SPs. As a result, travelling SPs are more likely to feel in control and their visits run more smoothly.

6.1.3 Information for seafarers

In addition to information about seafarers, SPs also gather information *for* seafarers. Love entails caring about and paying attention to the other and things related to the other. SPs are concerned with all sorts of information associated with seafarers. The HCS has forums containing recruitment information, salary information and professional information. SPs cannot of course contribute to these. They can, however, read them and gather information for their partners. For example:

> Information forums help me know recent maritime regulations on time. Maritime pictures help me enjoy the view of sea without going there. Human resources explain to me the most recent development of seafarers' salary and recruitment, in case my husband needs this information in the future..... I am not satisfied with my husband's present job and hope that he can have a change. [Breeze]

> I can also go to the forum of 'Exchange of Skills' to view engine technology, to learn something, and to collect this information which I will give to my boyfriend when he comes back. I can also go to 'Information' forums to check the changes of maritime laws and regulations and tell my boyfriend in case he misses it ... [Lovely-Dolphin]

Thus, Breeze was able to collect information about maritime regulation, salary and recruitment for her husband. By doing so, she hoped to contribute to her husband's career development. Similarly, Lovely-Dolphin also cared about her boyfriend's career and gathered relevant information for him.

Some SPs then, acted as researchers for their partners' career and working conditions. Arguably, they gained a sense of emancipation through learning about their partners' occupational lives, conditions, laws, since they were able to display their knowledge and competence to at least their partners. At the same time, it enabled SPs to do and contribute something towards the well-being of their beloved. In other words, the HCS to a certain extent provided SPs with a means to fulfil their love – caring about the other.

In general, it appears that the HCS liberates SPs from the limited information that they used to have to cope with everyday life. This helps SPs to achieve a certain amount of control over their lives or at least a sense of this. The HCS pools

informational resources scattered among different individuals. By participating, SPs are able to share in this pool of information. One participant may contribute very little to the pool, yet she is able to consume the whole. Barbrook (1999; 2000), Raymond (2000) and Rheingold (1993) argue that the Internet facilitates a gift economy, for many users are engaged in free information exchange. Kollock (1999) suggests that the Internet helps to produce 'public goods' through users' cooperation. In the HCS, we can also say that users are contributing to produce 'public goods' for the free 'consumption' of every member. In this consumption, SP participants free themselves from the limited local knowledge, and instead they gain access to information and knowledge that other SPs and seafarers know. In this section, we mainly mentioned about factual information. Sometimes, when SPs faced difficulties with the SP-seafarer relationship, others would also offer speculative explanations based on their previous experiences to help initiators make sense of the situation. Such explanations could be informational, though not factual. These, however, tended to address emotional problems, and therefore we leave them for the next section.

6.2 Emotional Exchange and Support

We all experience ups and downs emotionally; and we may also need others to share our problems and happiness. In everyday life, most of the time we depend on family members, friends and others in our social networks to overcome practical and emotional difficulties. SPs, as indicated in Chapter 5, may experience emotional and social isolation. In this context, the HCS empowers SPs to offer each other mutual emotional support. This section examines the ways in which SPs shared their emotions and feelings with similar others in the HCS. First, however, I shall discuss emotion management in everyday life.

6.2.1 Emotional management

We all experience emotions which seek expression. However, through processes of socialisation, we learn to a lesser or greater extent to shape our feelings and control our emotional displays. Goffman (1969) has argued that in everyday self-presentation a social actor engages in creating a 'front' through managing appearance, manner, talking, emotional expression and other 'stage props' according to social norms. According to Goffman (1972:44), societies 'must mobilise their numbers as self-regulating participants in social encounters' in order to be societies; and

correspondingly, the members of societies have to learn and perform 'interaction rituals' to become competent social actors. More explicitly, Hochschild (1979; 1983) developed emotion management theory, which suggests that the self is an 'emotion manager': through 'emotion work', the self either evokes desired feelings or suppresses inappropriate sentiments according to 'feeling rules' – social norms governing what one should feel in specific contexts. Thus, members of society need to manage their emotional expressions in order to fit into social norms. Those who do not do so face social sanctions (Goffman, 1972; Hochschild, 1979; 1983). In this way, group solidarity is reinforced.

Repressing feelings, however, can only conceal them, it cannot make them disappear (James, 1989), and this may involve a cost. Pennebaker *et al.* (1988: 244) propose that 'the inhibition or active holding back of thoughts, emotions, or behaviours is associated with physical work that, over time, can become manifested in disease.' In their longitudinal study, fifty university students were divided into two groups. In each day of four consecutive days, one group was required to write about their most upsetting experiences and associated feelings; the other group was asked to write on assigned specific subjects without involving their feelings. At the end of the study, the health centre of the university provided data regarding participants' illness times for the five months prior to the study and for the six weeks of the study. It was found that those who were forced to reveal their upsetting emotional experiences showed improvements in physical health compared with those in the other group. This study indicates that proper emotional release has a positive impact on an individual's physical well-being (see also Pennebaker and Beall, 1986).

Therefore, an audience (or an imagined audience in the case of Pennebacker *et al.*'s study) can be helpful for those who are experiencing painful emotions. In research into cancer patients (Colbourne and Sque, 2005), kidney transplant patients and parents of diabetes children (Lowes and Gill, 2006), interviewees found that in-depth interviews were 'helpful' and 'healing', because the interviews provided them an opportunity to vent their distress which may not be available to them in everyday life. For example, an interviewee in the latter study said of the interview:

> I think it's definitely been helpful...because you wouldn't normally want to talk about it or feel that actually people are interested really, would you?

An audience who can provide attentive listening thus appears valuable for the emotionally distressed.

It is less likely that we will discuss our emotions and feelings with everybody. Rather, we tend to do it only with intimate others and those working in social services. It has been suggested that romantic relationships provide intimacy which allows couples to release their pent-up emotions accumulated in the work place and the outside world (Giddens, 1992; Parsons, 1959). Intimate friendships also serve this purpose and can provide a forum in which friends mutually work on emotional tensions produced in other contexts. For example, Harrison (1998) and Jerrome (1984) argue that friendship between women serves as a backstage for them to relax from and vent their discontentment with their marriages. Similarly, one may be able to complain to friends about problems encountered in the work place. There are certainly, other social institutions, such as kinships, social workers, and counselling services, fulfilling a similar function (Parkes, 1996).

When we reveal our emotional tension to others, we implicitly invite others to share our emotional burden with us. For example, when our friends show signs of or complain about their distress, we would probably comfort them. In doing so, we take on the burden to normalise the situation for the friends and make an effort to assure them that it is not as bad as they think. In this process, as it were, we share our friends' emotional load, which arguably speeds up the process of healing. We do this, of course, in the hope (consciously or unconsciously) that the friends would do the same for us when we are in need; and also that when our friends are happy we are able to share their happiness as well. Seeing from this perspective, we can draw an analogy between doing physical work and doing emotion work. When doing a physical job, for example, hunting, our friends' collaboration enables us to do what we are unable to do single-handedly – hunting a bear for example, or to do it much more efficiently. In return, we would invite our friends to share the outcome of the job – the meat of the bear; and also we would give our friends a hand when they need us. If collaboration with others enables us to combat the natural world more efficiently, sharing feelings in a sense help us win battles in the emotional world.

6.2.2 The predicament of SPs and the rise of the HCS

Unlike others, seafarers' frequent absence may deprive SPs of emotional support from their partners. They miss their partners' listening ears and comforting words. Instead of providing a base for sharing feelings, SPs romantic relationships generate emotional tensions, such as longing and loneliness. As shown in Chapter 5, SPs intimate offline friends, who are often not linked to seafaring, may not understand much of SP's experiences and their kin may be against their relations with seafarers. This is likely to make SPs averse to disclosing their inner thoughts to those in their offline social networks. Many informants of the study reported that they normally did not talk to others regarding their experiences of emotional tensions in their offline life. Yangtze-Girl's words, for example, suggest that in real life she had difficulty in finding an opportunity to share her bad feelings with others and therefore she had to bear them alone:

> In real life, I bear it alone! It is quite natural that my family members are not happy with my choosing of a seafarer. If taking this and that kind of unhappiness into consideration, probably, he and I would not come together today [if I complain to my parents]! Therefore, I can only shoulder pressures in work and unhappiness in real life alone!

In this situation, the HCS enables SPs to share their feelings. Sharing presupposes disclosing in the first place. Being a dedicated website to seafaring communities, it needs contributions from various groups in this community, including SPs, seafarers, and crewing agencies. This implicitly encourages SPs to write their experiences here, one part of which is their emotional experiences. The following two features of the HCS make SPs more willing to disclose themselves.

A place to 'meet' and disclose to similar others

The HCS provides a platform for SPs to 'meet' each other. Considering the difficulties in the offline world for SPs to gather together (see Chapter 5), the HCS, in a sense, liberates SP participants from geographical barriers. Smiling-Face, a 30-year-old and married SP, for example, described her first impression of this website as such:

> There were so many seafarers and SPs [in the HCS]. I had wondered whether there were [SPs like me in the world] or not.

Smiling-Face seemed to feel isolated and not to know other SPs before. Through the HCS, however, she became aware that there were many SPs in China, and at the same time, she became connected to these many others. Another informant – Lady-X, a newly married SP in her mid-20s, suggested:

> I live in an inland city and do not have many opportunities to come across things related to sea [and meet other SPs]. [I] hope that I can meet more SPs through this website.

The HCS gave Lady-X the hope to meet many other SPs. This hope would not be realised easily in the offline world since she lived in an inland city. The website therefore put SPs, who otherwise remain isolated, in touch with each other.

Being all SPs, they have many things in common. Many of those interviewed for the project used the phrases 'common language' and 'same feelings'. For example:

> When we come into this website, we have a common language... [Crystal-Heart]

> There are many postings written by seafarer-partners. We have the same feelings. I feel that they voiced what I want to say. [Lily]

This commonality makes it easy for them to empathise with each other (Preece, 2000). Empathy is commonly defined as knowing and feeling what another person is feeling (Levenson and Ruef, 1992). Lily's words above suggest that SPs are able to know each others' feelings and speak each other's mind more or less accurately. This is a big contrast to the offline world, where SPs are more likely to be surrounded by non-seafaring others who do not understand their feelings or appreciate fully their situations.

According to Wallace (1999; see also Salem *et al.*, 1997), the common experiences and easily available empathy in some online groups made members willing to open themselves and reciprocate others' disclosure. This is also the case for SP participants in the HCS. Yangtze-Girl and Lovely-Dolphin, who were both 24 and unmarried, stated:

> In real life, I bear it alone! ...Since I entered the HCS, I discovered sisters who, like me, are waiting. Probably, sea and seafarers draw us very near; there is nothing to hide! I discovered that they also experienced what I did and we encourage each other. We are like sisters, family members! [Yangtze-Girl]

> I used to repress myself before, and keep everything to myself. Only occasionally when I could not bear any more, I went to my good friends and talked a bit. But I know that they did not understand me and could not sympathise with me. Moreover, I was well aware that actually they did not want to listen to me...So, I never talked to them again. All these do not exist online. Here online I can say what I want to say freely. I can find sympathy. Compared with family members and friends, I am more willing to confide to friends in the HCS. [Lovely-Dolphin]

The HCS was thus highly regarded by both informants. It provided them with empathic 'sisters' with whom they could share feelings. The willingness of SPs to open themselves is further reinforced by the next feature.

A place for 'speaking one's mind'

As participants are not physically co-present, it is their texts that must represent what they want to say. This makes it easier for SPs to express their emotions. When we speak to others face-to-face, we need to manage our posture and facial expression properly (Goffman, 1969). In many situations, however, we may feel so awkward or shy that it is difficult to manage facial expressions and thus we may give up disclosing our feelings. In such situations, we may find it is easier to express ourselves indirectly through writing a letter or note, since we do not need to face others when writing and therefore do not need to manage non-verbal expressions. Writing then, has a *mediating effect*, which to a certain extent lifts the onus of doing face-to-face interactional work and gives us more freedom to 'speak'. Equally, text co-presence in the HCS has this effect and renders SPs more willing to disclose themselves. For example, V-Boat, a married SP in her early 30s, said:

> I can talk about some issues online that I am reluctant or too shy to talk about in real life. [Online], there is no awkwardness that exists in face-to-face chat. Moreover, we do not know each other online. [So it is easier,] we can speak our mind without consideration of negative consequences.

V-Boat's words suggest two things. First, she felt less awkward to 'talk' her feelings online for she did not need to do identity work to the same extent, though she still needed to manage textual self-presentation. Secondly, she was anonymous in the HCS, which gave her another layer of protection.

Anonymity provides protection and encourages people to reveal themselves. Online, people cannot easily be traced for what they have said and done. The assumption is that information revealed in an anonymous environment will not find it way back to this person and make him/her accountable and vulnerable. As a result, Derlega and Chaikin (1977) argue, people feel safer to disclose more to strangers than to their friends. Similarly, many studies of the Internet suggest that the more anonymous environment online encourages self-disclosure (Kendall, 2002; Orgad, 2005; Salem *et al.*, 1997). In the HCS, we will see in Chapter 7 that while the HCS could provide an anonymous setting, some SP participants met each other face-to-face and some posted their photographs in the website, thereby reducing their level of anonymity. This was a minority group however. Moreover, the mediating effect arguably helped this minority group of SPs to express themselves more freely. Several informants, including Flying-Fish who posted her pictures here, mentioned that they were able to speak their mind online in this website without worrying much about negative effects. Of course this was within the self-sanctioned norms of participants and the regulatory rules stipulated by the managers.

> In real life, no one can speak her/his mind fully ...While online, we can speak our minds. I can talk of my longing. In others words, I can give vent to all kinds of my emotions and feelings. [Flying-Fish]

> [Chatting online, I] do not have pressures or burdens. I do not need to worry about their response and therefore feel more at ease. In addition, I do not need to worry that my inner thoughts will be known by those others who know me. [Green-Pepper]

As a result, this disembodied space blurs the line between the private and the public (Waskul, 1996; Waskul and Douglas, 1996; Williams, 2003). It is private, because as the above informants suggested they revealed information online that they normally did only to bosom friends or even kept to themselves in the offline world; it is public, because this space is publicly accessible and any participant can read it. This blurring of the private/public empowered a large number of SPs to reveal their feelings. When more and more people come and join in to do so, arguably a culture favouring emotional disclosure is formed. In its turn, this culture encourages SP participants to reveal their otherwise repressed feelings. For most informants, one reason to write here was to let go of saved-up feelings, as two informants stated:

Sometimes, the aim of making postings is to express my feelings. [Anna]

Sometimes when I want to confide my thoughts and feelings and release my emotions, I will initiate and reply to many postings at one time. I like to initiate and respond to postings regarding emotions, for example, seafarers' relations with their lovers meet problems, some people are not confident about their relationships when they are separated, seafarer-partners' lives when they are alone, why marry seafarers, no regret for being a seafarer-partner ... ... These emotions and feelings are very similar to mine. I feel empathy with them. I will try my best to comfort them, to encourage them, and to support them. [Rose]

Rose's words suggest that she not only gave vent to her emotions in the HCS but also provided comfort for others. In effect, this was external emotion work[21], the techniques and implications of which I shall discuss in detail in the next sub-section.

6.2.3 Doing emotion work

The name of the forum – *communication between Seafarers and SPs* (where the sampled threads were from) – suggests that it is equally for seafarers and for SPs. However, all of the five former and current moderators since October 2004 (the time I started paying attention to this website) and the majority of the participants were SPs. This particular forum was the most frequently used one by SPs. All informants of this study in one way or another suggested that this was their favourite forum. The reason for this probably is because it offers a space for SPs to gather together and disclose their feelings.

Most informants mentioned that the most attractive postings for them were those with an affective dimension. This is further illustrated by the fact that half of the sampled twenty threads are about deeply held feelings (for an overview of the sample, see Sub-section 3.2.4). The following is the list of ten topics (the main contents of the postings are in brackets except those to be used as examples):

- I can no longer carry on. Let's terminate the relationship (Example A)

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[21] Elsewhere, it has also been referred to as 'interpersonal emotion management' (Francis, 1997) or 'reciprocal emotion management' (Lively, 2000), since it involves 'managing the emotions of others' (Thoits, 1996) or managing the emotions of each other.

- A barrier for us (Example B)
- Stop waiting (Example C)
- Messages stored in my mobile phone (the initiator showed a few love messages from her boyfriend and sought others' opinion regarding whether her boyfriend really loved her or not)
- Women who never switch off mobiles (Example D)
- Waiting till hair becomes white (Having chosen a seafarer, the initiator felt that she would wait for him with hope)
- Seaman's wife (Having seen the TV series 'Seaman's wife', the initiator reflected on herself)
- To seafarers' mothers (Having received a phone-call from her boyfriend's mother, she realised that seafarers' mothers also need emotional care)
- What is love actually? (the initiator reflected on her love experiences)
- So simple (the initiator reflected on her 'simple' life and 'simple' love)

The first four reveal frustrations caused by separations and relationships, while the remaining six are categorised as expressive postings (expressing reflections on love in particular on life in general) which will be discussed in the next sub-section. In this sub-section, we only focus on the first four to detail the techniques and implications of emotion work in the site.

Of the four, the first SP – Bluesky – experienced several problems while her boyfriend was at sea. She wrote:

> Example A: I have thought it over and over again. Maybe we should terminate the relationship, because I cannot sustain it any longer. I have not recovered from the illness... I just knew from a phone-call today that my father got injured in work and my brother has also been injured in the school. My mother has to take care of the shop, my father and brother alone, since I am not well and not together with them either. I feel so bad and useless....

The second SP, Lotus, also revealed her frustration which was caused by her parents' objection of the relationship with a seafarer. She wrote:

> Example B: Several days ago when my parents knew that I was still in a relationship with my boyfriend, they admonished me. They are not happy with his job and family and are forcing me to terminate the relationship. What should I do? Please give me some

suggestions!

Another two threads revealed that those two SPs were not entirely sure about whether their boyfriends were loving them or not. In other words, they doubted the credibility of the relationship. In order to save space, I only illustrate this by using Camilla's posting here:

> Example C: Having seen that most sisters' lovers here are working in the deep sea fleet, I used to feel fortunate that I could keep in touch with him through messages and phone-calls... After he left, I make use of every little spare time to send messages to him. Gradually, sending messages becomes the main theme of my life and it is my source of happiness. ... But he always replies me at the ratio of 1:3. This hurts me. I warned him several times. But after only few days, he would be back to his former attitude. This time I feel that I have had enough. ... I sent him a message: Since it continues like this, we'd better break up. ...

Drawing upon the theories of Darwin and Freud, Arlie Hochschild (1983) offers one account of emotion, that is, it signals a *gap* between the perceived *reality* and the tacitly held *expectations*[22]. When we are angry at a person, for instance, it may be because that person's attitude or behaviour does not conform to our expectations. This account seems suitable to explain SPs activities online in the HCS. It appears that the cause of Bluesky's (example A) bad feelings was those unexpected and unfortunate events that she described. When she wrote this, she had an audience in mind. From the tone, we can see that she was talking directly to her boyfriend. This may indicate that such disclosure was private. Yet, the fact that Bluesky wrote this in a public forum suggests that she regarded other SPs as audience. By disclosing this, on the one hand, she gave vent to pent-up feelings; on the other, she implicitly invited other SPs' to give her some comfort and advice to bridge the gap. Examinations of Lotus (example B) and Camilla's (example C) postings reveal how their frustrations can

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[22] In another account – affect control theory (Heiss, 1989; see also Turner and Stets, 2006), emotions are seen as signalling the extent to which one's identity is confirmed by others: the more it is confirmed, the more the social actor would experience positive emotions, such as pride and happiness; the less it is confirmed, the more he/she would experience negative feelings, such as shame and guilt. According to this account, then, emotions also involve a process of comparison, comparing the situation and others' reactions (the perceived reality) with one's definition of his/her fundamental identity (one's own sense and expectation of what he/she deserves).

also be interpreted as indicating gaps between perceived reality and expectations. In example B, it could be argued that Lotus possibly expected that her parents would support her but this was not the case. While in example C, apparently, Camilla hoped very much to be reciprocated by her boyfriend but only to be disappointed by his failure. Similarly, these two SPs were asking for advice and suggestions, though the second one was more explicit.

To illustrate how SPs performed emotion work in the HCS, we need to look at some of the 'replying postings'. Fifteen SPs replied to the Bluesky's posting, eleven to Lotus, and another fifteen to Camilla. An analysis of the replies revealed that SPs used several strategies to support the frustrated initiators. To avoid repetition, I only use some representative replies to illustrate these tactics. The first one is *acknowledging that it is not easy to be a SP*. To posting A, one SP replied:

> **A1**[23]: SPs do sacrifice a lot, especially in difficult times. I hope that together with your friends you can overcome the current problems. Problems are always fleeting.

One participant answered to posting B:

> **B1**: There are lots of problems in our [SPs'] way. I think the best way forward for both of us and our parents is to move and change our parents, and to make them understand and support our choice. Maybe by that time, I think we will be the happiest persons in the world.

Both repliers first acknowledged the difficulties of being a SP. By doing so, on the one hand, they offered sympathy and understanding; on the other, they suggested implicitly that hard times were common for SPs and thus *normalised* the problems. Acknowledgement, however, did not seem enough, since it did not give anything helping solve the problems. Therefore, A1 went on to *encourage* the initiator to overcome the problem; and B1 offered *advice*.

The second strategy of providing help is *encouraging the frustrated to be strong*, as shown in A1. Another two also offered encouragement to Bluesky:

> **A2**: Do not feel too sad. Things will be going better. Believe yourself, believe your love!
>
> **A3**: The suffering will be over soon. The sun will come out after the rain.

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[23] A1 indicates the first quoted reply to posting example A. The same pattern is used afterward, such as B1, A3, and C4, for easy reference.

One SP replied to Lotus urging continuance:

> **B2**: If you love each other, do not give up! I give you my best wishes and may you happy forever!

Though replying to different postings, all three SPs encouraged the initiators to overcome their difficult times: hold on to your love, do not give up; although there are problems, they are fleeting; happiness is just lying ahead! Thus, the encouragement also served, on the one hand, to *play down* difficulties, since the latter was regarded as fleeting; on the other, to offer a hope – sufferings will end soon. These encouraging words arguably provided some strength and confidence to the initiators to tide over the hard times.

The third replying tactic is to *reframe the situation* for the initiators. For example:

> **A4**: This is just your temporary feeling. In fact, you are blaming him, since so many things have happened but he is not with you! I can understand your feeling, for this happened to me before. In fact, you do not really want to terminate the relationship. Think twice and have confidence on yourself and him. Do not let yourself feel regret in the future.

This replier started her response by *playing down* the situation – it was temporary and thus was not as serious as the initiator had thought. Following that, she *reframed* the situation for the initiator. In this SP's view, Bluesky was blaming rather than intending to break up with her boyfriend, and therefore the action of terminating the relationship should not be taken; otherwise, it would be costly. The fact that 'this has happened to me' justified her competence in doing this on the one hand, and *normalised* the situation for Bluesky on the other – you are not the only one but many of us have experienced this problem. In the end, this replying SP *encouraged* Bluesky to 'have confidence' and offered *advice* – 'think twice' and 'do not let yourself feel regret'. The reframing strategy was widely used in replies to posting C:

> **C1**: Do not mind this too much. In the past, we could only expect letters which take several months. How fortunate now we are that we have mobiles! Onboard the ship, he cannot carry the mobile everywhere. He cannot receive you messages on time. Even he can, he may not be able to reply to you immediately since he has got job to do. Moreover, not the whole coastal sea is covered by network service. Some areas are not covered at all. ...

> **C2**: Many times, our environments and moods are not synchronised. ... When you are

full of passion, maybe he is busy with working; when you are sleeping, maybe he becomes passionate. ... We are all different. Especially with those in distance relationships, synchronisation is very difficult.

C3: In the past, I also used to hasten my husband to reply to my messages. Only after I visited his ship did I realise that how hard and tiresome his job is. There are always reasons for not responding to messages. Do not take it serious.

C4: All men are careless. My partner only replies to me once after receiving one hundred of messages from me. ...

C5: Actually, all men are like that. Pursuing girls is just one process. Once this process finishes, they have many more important things to do. But they have only limited energy. Therefore, as their partners, we will get used to it gradually.

These replies reframed and reinterpreted the situation from different perspectives. C1 first *downplayed* the problem: compared with the past, you are in a better position and should feel satisfied. Then the replier continued to give two possible reasons to justify the failure of Camilla's boyfriend: either he was working or there was no network coverage. C2 offered another reason – tempo-spatial dislocation and asynchronisation. Based on her own experience, the third replier believed that seafarers had to work hard and therefore not much energy left for messaging. The first three replies also gave Camilla a sense of what could be happening at sea. In this respect, they were informational, though speculative. The last two generalised men's 'nature' and suggested that it was 'natural' for men not to reciprocate women's intimacy.

In her study of a group American women's friendship, Oliker's (1989) respondents reported that their female friends used reframing strategies quite often to help them defuse marital tensions. Oliker further differentiated three reframing techniques: generating *empathy* for the husband, *ennobling* the husband, and humour. The first two are visible in the above replies: while C1 and C2 asked Camilla to see from her boyfriend's perspective (which would help to generate empathy for her boyfriend), C3 ennobled seafarers as hard-working. Besides these two reframing techniques, C4 and C5 reveal another reframing strategy: *naturalising*. Reframing, as we can see from the examples, was at the same time *normalising*. It served to convince initiators that the situations were more widely experienced and normal and therefore there was no need to feel unhappy or distressed. Playing down and normalising the situation, arguably,

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would change the initiators' perception of reality and thus help to bridge the gap between the expectation and the perception.

Reframing also helped frustrated SPs to make sense of what were happening to them. The initiators' bad experiences disrupted their lives and made them feel insecure about themselves and their relationships. In a sense, they might feel loss of control. Others' reinterpretations threw a positive light on the situations and thus helped the initiators to understand things in a less threatening way. Orgad's (2004a; 2004b) study of breast cancer patients' web-pages and online help groups suggests that their sharing of illness experiences and knowledge gained from this served to empower patients in the sense that they were able to make sense of and manage the threat and disruption that the cancer posed to their routine everyday lives. Similarly, reframing in the HCS might make it easier for distressed SPs to manage their disrupted lives and to regain a sense of security and control. Maybe for this reason, Camilla came back to the thread and thanked others for their support.

If the above mentioned reframing is positive in the sense that it offered comforting words, there are also negative ones, which seem to blame the initiator. I shall refer to this as the fourth strategy: *counter-interpretation*. One SP replied to posting A:

> **A5**: Do not just think about your suffering. Take into consideration that he suffers on the ship more than you do ashore. You have family members and friends around to help you. In contrast, he is alone at the sea and far away from home.... I am also a SP. I think what I can do is to support him, not to let him worry, and let him know that I love him. He is at sea. If you hurt him like this, are you not afraid that he becomes too worried to be prone to accidents?

This SP seems very judgemental and critical. She blamed Bluesky for 'selfishness' and in a sense was forcing Bluesky to see the situation from a different perspective and to evoke *empathy* for her boyfriend: take your boyfriend's well-being into consideration! This perspective, the replier seemed to think, would lead Bluesky to change her perception – her sufferings were much less compared with her boyfriend's and therefore it was unfair to expect too much from him. Justified by her own experiences, this SP 'taught' Bluesky what action she should take: do not let your boyfriend worry. However, this strategy was rarely used in the HCS, maybe because it showed a sense of hostility.

The final technique of offering support identified is *offering advice*, which as we saw, sometimes is intertwined with other forms of tactics. Here, I show more examples:

> **B3**: Try your best to get your parents' consent. When you become a seafarer's wife, you will be home alone for a long period of time, during which you will need your parents' support.

> **B4**: If you are deep in love with each other, and if you are really prepared for the future difficulties of being a SP, take action to change your parents' attitude.

> **C6**: Do not hold it too tight. Learn to release it a bit sometimes. Like chocolate, it melts if you hold it too tight.

B3 not only gave a suggestion, but also pointed out the implication of not acquiring consent from parents. B4 advised Lotus to transform her parents' attitude. Although the two suggestions were a bit different, the aim was the same – try to change the parents. Based upon her understanding of love, C6 offered her advice to Camilla: give your boyfriend some freedom. These suggestions, arguably, helped the initiators to take informed actions.

The five strategies of doing emotion work – acknowledging the difficulties, encouraging the frustrated to be strong, reframing the situation, counter-interpreting the situation, and offering advice – contributed to alleviate tensions for initiators. On the one hand, these tactics might change the initiators' perception of reality through normalising and downplaying the bad experiences; on the other, they offered advice for initiators to alter the situation through actions. To a certain extent, these techniques would reduce the gap between perception and expectation and thus the emotional tension (Hochschild, 1983). In this sense, support in the HCS helps to liberate SPs from frustrations and tensions. Mermaid, a 25-year-old architecture assistant, for example, said:

> I feel that ... since he is not home, there is a kind of longing. I want very much to talk to other seafarer-partners about my situation, the problems I experienced in work and everyday life, and my pressure. Then they would reply to me... some of them give me advice, which I feel gives me guidance in life. Their replies also help to remove some of my pressure.

Mermaid's words indicate an interplay between the internal emotional struggle and the external emotion work (Craib, 1998). Internally, Mermaid had difficulties in

dealing with pressures from both work and her lonely life, which gave rise to tension. To ease these tensions, Mermaid externalised her pressures through revealing them in the HCS, which invited others to offer her advice and encouragement, and to guide her to see things from different but positive perspectives. Others' replies thus helped Mermaid to unload some of her pressures and lessen the internal tensions.

The support offered by replying SPs, as we can see from the above analysis, in effect, served to *nurture* relationships between seafaring couples: the replies either encouraged initiators to hold on to the relationship, or downplayed and normalised the crisis of the relationship in order to ease the tension within it, or advised initiators to remove the barriers that came in the way of the relationship. This seems to have become a norm in the HCS among SPs. This is not to say, however, that SPs always 'force' initiators to stay in the relationship. Online observation suggested that only when SPs perceived that the two persons were in love with each other and only each other, did they offer opinions and advice to foster the relationship. Otherwise, they would advise the involved SP to break up the relationship.

We should notice that SP participants' emotion work in the HCS is collective, rather than dyadic in nature. Each replier only does part of the job, yet the initiator receives the whole. This makes it easier for the repliers. On the one hand, the replying SP will not be trapped in the situation and does not need to share the initiator's burden for a long time. Having replied, she can move on without feeling guilty for leaving the distressed other so soon. On the other hand, only those willing and able to reply need to do so and there is no pressure to make a posting. In other words, the SP has choice in the first place – if she does not know how she should respond, she can choose not to or leave the thread; if the open posting cannot evoke her sympathy and empathy, she has no obligation to evoke them on her own. Unlike emotion work done in the offline settings, emotional engagement in replying to postings does not necessarily require the replier to repress some feelings, while evoking others actively. The potential replier is free to feel, though not necessarily express, what she feels. For this reason, I shall call it 'free emotion work'. However, although each replier only gives a small slot of their time, the total amount of comfort from all of them may be invaluable to the initiator.

'Free emotion work' does not mean that SP participants are mean in sharing others' burdens. It has been suggested that that women are more willing to share personal problems and offer emotional support in online discussion groups (Seale *et al.*, 2006; Wallace, 1999). This appeared to be the case in the HCS. The postings in the forum of *Communication between Seafarers and SPs* received far more replies than those of other forums such as those exclusively for seafarers. The online field-note below shows this:

> I checked the response rate of the two major forums. One is the 'communication between seafarers' which is mainly for seafarers to participate, the other is the 'communication between seafarers and seafarer partners'. I counted the total number of responses in the fourth page of each forum. The response rate of 'communication between seafarers' is 166 (replies) /30 (threads), while the other one is 880/30. The difference is obvious. [11/08/2005]

The difference may indicate that SPs are more likely than seafarers to support each other. Maybe for this reason, Lady-X, a married SP and around 25 years old, stated:

> We care for each other, support each other, and sustain each other in those days when seafarers are not home.

It is this belief and empathy that motivates SPs to provide comfort to each other, which to a certain extent liberates SPs from distress and internal tension and helps them to tide over hard times. Besides that, the HCS also empowers SPs to share and appreciate each other's stories and reflections, to which we turn next.

6.2.4 Sharing emotional feelings and stories

The Internet offers us a forum for self-expression. We may all reflect on our lives, and want to communicate our inner thoughts to others. Through expressing these, we hope that others could appreciate and confirm our feelings, since others' confirmation makes us feel that we are not alone or out of place in this world. Yet, in everyday life, we may be constrained from expressing these thoughts because we could not find the right time, place and audience to do so. While philosophers, artists and writers are able to communicate these feelings in their works, most of us perhaps can only discuss about these with close friends and in intimate conversations. Maybe as a reaction to this, personal web-pages and blogs, through which one is able to convey his/her inner thought to an audience, have proliferated. Drawing upon Maslow's

(1970) hierarchy of needs, Liu (2005) argues that participating in online groups fulfils one's various needs, one of which is self-expression.

The HCS serves a similar function for SPs. Apart from generating tensions, seafarers' long-term absence gives SPs more space for reflections on love in particular and life in general. SPs' reflections, arguably, are associated with the seafaring lifestyle. As shown in section 5.4, their non-SP friends may be the wrong audience and participants for discussing such feelings. In this context, the availability of a SP audience and the blurring of the private and the public in the HCS, as shown earlier in this section, in a sense liberates SP participants and provides them with a channel for expressing their inner thoughts, as one SP wrote:

> For a long time, I have been thinking of setting up a webpage about the life of seafarers and SPs ...... [because] I want to disclose and express my thoughts and feelings [as a SP]. The HCS gives me this platform... [Fieldnote, 29/12/2005]

As a result, it appears that SPs are more likely to disclose their reflections on love experiences in the HCS. Six out of the ten sampled emotive threads can be categorised as such (the titles of these postings have been listed in the last sub-section). Here, I only show one sampled thread. The initiating SP wrote reflectively:

> ... I never switch off my mobile, but do not know why. Having read a story, now I know that it is because of the attachment [to him]. Let's share the story:
>
> The girl had a boyfriend and they contacted each other quite often through mobile. One night, the boy was missing the girl and made a call. But the girl had slept and switched off her mobile. The second day, the boy said to the girl, 'Please do not switch off your mobile, if you can. When I miss you but cannot get in touch with you, I will feel worried.' After that, the girl never turned off her mobile. But in the end, their relationship started breaking. The girl wanted to save it and made a call to the boy in one mid-night. The boy had turned off his mobile. The girl knew that their relationship was power off.
>
> After many years, the girl started another relationship but she still remembered her ex-boyfriend. One mid-night, the girl was heavily ill and tried to contact her parents. By a mistake, she dialled her new boyfriend's number. The boy had slept but kept his mobile on... Later, she asked the boy why he kept the mobile on that late. The boy said, 'In case that you may need me in mid-nights.' The girl was touched and married the boy.
>
> Since my boyfriend went to the sea, I have fostered the habit of sleeping with the mobile

on, though many people say that in order to avoid the radiation it is better to switch off mobiles before sleep ... because I know how precious an opportunity is for him to be able to make a phone-call...

Do you switch off your mobile in mid-nights?

This SP was telling a story, and drawing upon this story she reflected on her own experience. From this posting, we can see this SP's attitude towards the relationship and love: one should always care and be ready to protect the well-being of the other. For this reason, she made herself available for her boyfriend's call around the clock though at a certain price. Her reflection provoked a similar feeling in twenty six other SPs, who replied that they were doing the same: never switching off the mobile for fear that they might miss their partners' phone-calls. This thread also suggests how important SPs regard a phone-call from their partners.

Through sharing inner thoughts, SPs confirm and validate each other's feelings and experiences. In the context that SPs' feelings may not be fully appreciated by people around them in the offline world, this confirmation was highly regarded by all the informants of this study. For example, Smiling-Face said:

Interviewer: When your threads get many replies, how do you feel?

Smiling-Face: Oh, finally, I've got friends who can understand me!

The more replies the thread attracts, the more flattered the initiator feels. Even short replies, such as 'I agree with you' and 'Support you' which are banal and trivial in outsiders' eyes, may be interpreted by the initiator as a pat on the back. They signal understanding and empathy, which makes the initiator feel that her attitude is valued and appreciated. For this reason, it seems that writing postings involves an element of self-performance, to which we shall return in section 6.3.

Perhaps, there is another reason for SPs' self-expression. Their love can hardly be materialised when their partners are at sea. From a Freudian perspective, this emotional energy needs to be diverted or sublimated. Expressive writings in this context become a medium or substitute in which SPs can invest their energy. Maybe for this reason, many informants of this study suggested that they were less 'productive' and made fewer postings when their partners were home. Rainbow, for example, said explicitly:

When he is away, I have lots of feelings and thought to write. Now [when he is back]

even if you asked me to write, I would not be able to write that kind of postings.

Thus, it seems that writing such expressive postings is a way of doing intimacy. Even reading these postings made some SPs feel that they were emotionally close with their absent partners (we will discuss this in detail in sub-section 8.2.1).

If SP participants use everyday language to disclose their reflections and attitudes toward life in the forum of *Communication between Seafarers and SPs*, they sublimate their feelings into literary forms in the forum of *Original Literature*. The following is an example posting from this forum:

Not able to say...

Mood as deep as the sea.

Stormy tide...

Cannot activate the heart

That is longing for crazy revelry.

Sad blue...

Makes the sea irresistible blue.

Grey heart...

Sinks with words.

Dare not to listen to the sea...

Which is like nameless music.

It only forces empty heart...

Filled with blue memories again.

After ebb...

In the silent night.

Cannot find...

The rhythm of life.

Nameless feelings...

Only want to listen to the sea's wail.

Infected with colours and moods lack in life.

Of course, poetry is just one textual expressive form. More commonly, the postings are in the form of essays and stories. In December 2006, three threads initiated by SPs were defined as 'top-up' ones in this forum. This means that the moderators of the forum regarded these postings as in high quality and thus worthy everybody's

attention. All three threads are lengthy and contained dozens of episodes of autobiographical reflections. One SP in one thread wrote about her eighteen years' experiences of being a SP. She recounted her love story and associated feelings. In the second thread, a younger SP recorded her detailed journey and experiences of visiting her boyfriend's ship. In the third thread, another young SP wrote her love stories with her boyfriend.

On the one hand, writing these stories, as argued earlier, seems to provide SPs with a way of doing intimacy. By doing so, presumably, SPs (re)experience their love in an imagined way. On the other, the authors share their experiences and inner thoughts with others. Such an action implicitly invites others' appreciation and response. As social beings, we all expect others' understanding and hope that they can identify with us emotionally. When others identity with us, we are able to legitimise our feelings and attitudes and know that we are not alone. This gives us confidence to take action accordingly. In a similar vein, SPs need others to value their inner reflections. The availability of a group of SPs makes it possible for them to link up with each other emotionally. In this sense, the HCS empowers SPs to share and confirm their feelings and reflections.

6.2.5 Recording daily emotions in the diary space

The HCS also provides a diary space, where participants can record their daily activities. In the offline life, a diary is private and not supposed to be read by others. In the HCS, writers can choose whether to open their diaries to others or not. That means that diary entries can be either public or private.

It is impossible to know what is in the private diary space. However, the following interview extract might give a clue:

> Interviewer: Which function(s) of the website do you normally use?
>
> Helena: Mainly, it is writing diary. The first time I wrote there, I said: 'my dear husband, I feel closer to you in this website. I feel that I can communicate with you.'
>
> Interviewer: How do you communicate with your husband through diaries, since only you and other members can read them?
>
> Helena: My diaries are not open to others. Others' cannot read it. I feel that we are communicating in minds.

It seems that writing a diary for Helena was a way of talking to and sharing her thoughts with her husband. It made Helena feel that her husband was emotionally near. Similar to writing expressive postings, this can be regarded as doing imagined intimacy. There is also a difference, however. While the audience for 'postings' is other participants, husbands/boyfriends are the imagined audience of private diaries.

Though open to other participants, many SPs' public diaries also appeared addressed to their seafarer lovers and thus they were written in the style of an imagined communication between the couples, for example:

> Last time you said that it only takes around five days to sail from India to Singapore. Why is there still no information after nine days? I cannot help but miss you and hope to see you. But I could not find you after a long search in my dream.... [Fieldnote, 24.05/2006]

> Honey, I know you are concerned about your mother. I can feel what you are feeling, ... But you should see things from my perspective ... Though she is my mother in-law, we are not familiar with each other. [You asked me to spend the new year holiday with her.] It is too awkward for me ... [Fieldnote, 25/01/2006]

Of course, some diaries were the recount of daily experiences. For example:

> I feel dizzy today and there are problems in the work. The manager sent me an email accusing me of not forwarding those emails to him. My God, I have forwarded everything to him. It is the problem of his email-box. When he is back from USA, I will be scorned definitely. I am innocent! ... [Fieldnote, 06/01/2006]

The above three quoted diary entries were in the form of complaints, which were common in the HCS. Nevertheless, there were also diary entries expressing happiness and excitement. For example, there were accounts of when individuals received phone-calls from their partners, when their partners were coming back, or when they were going to visit the ship. The diaries appear to capture the less routine things in SPs' lives. Incidental snapshots of everyday working life and domestic, family, and relationship highs and lows are described.

Besides the imagined communication with the beloved, the public diary space in the HCS provides SP participants with another channel to express their feelings. As illustrated above, they express longing for their partners, and frustration and complaints about their relationships; they let go of their resentment associated with

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their job; they vent grudges against their parents in-law; and they also express their excitement. Two informants stated:

> Through the diary, I can reveal all sorts of my emotions - happiness, anger, sadness, gladness – here freely as I wish. [V-Boat]

> Diary is the place for me to shelf my moods. No matter whether I feel happy or sad, it is better to speak out. [Lovely-Dolphin]

The diary space thus seems to enable SPs to 'speak' out their feelings. Unlike those who initiate 'postings', diary writers may have no intention to receive others' responses. However, an opportunity to 'speak' out, suggested by V-Boat and Lovely-Dolphin, appears therapeutic. This reminds us of Pennebaker *et al.*' (1988) research of the impact of suppressing emotion on individuals' health which claimed that 'writing out' traumatic experiences and feelings has positive impacts on individuals' well-being.

The technical setting of the HCS has a 'diary commenting' function which enables diary readers to give comments. Some readers used this function to provide comforting words to some unhappy writers. This is similar to doing emotion work in forums as discussed in sub-section 6.2.3. Since we have described these strategies in that sub-section, here I only use one example to illustrate the point.

One SP wrote:

> I did not write diaries in the past two days, because I do not feel good. I should have myself recovered as soon as possible. In the past few days, I suddenly wanted to disconnect myself from the seafaring world. [I was] a bit neurotic. I will recover gradually. [Fieldnote: 25/01/2007]

Four other SPs commented on this diary entry:

1. We all have low ebbs. Wish you get out of it soon. Adjust yourself and be happy!
2. It seems that you are in a low ebb period! It does not matter; everything can be overcome in this world. Think something happy!
3. If you have a problem, you must talk to and communicate it with him. Do not let misunderstanding produce a gap between you and your boyfriend.
4. Communication is important!

Although the writer did not explain the reason for her bad feeling, the four SPs still tried to help her normalise the situation and to persuade her to take appropriate actions.

The first two attempted to reframe and downplay the situation: it is just a low ebb and everybody experiences that. The last two advised her to take action in order to avoid possible misunderstandings.

The scale of emotion work in the diary space is smaller compared with that in the forums. Online observation revealed that actually only a few diaries appeared to be receiving comments. Moreover, new participants' diaries were seldom commented on. It seems that participants were more likely to comment on those familiar participants' diaries. Thus, the relationship involved in diary commenting appears more personal rather than general. In chapter 7, we will see that writing diaries and commenting on diaries contribute to the process of making online friends and sustaining online friendships.

Albeit in small scale, the emotion work in the diary space also helps SPs tide over difficult times. One informant said:

> [W]hen writing diaries recording what you feel, some sisters will read them and comment on them. This is like warmth in winter! [Yangtze-Girl]

There is a general sense of well-being achieved when diaries receive supportive comments. Data suggests that the HCS built up a sense of belonging for SPs.

We have seen in this section that the HCS empowers SPs in several ways. Firstly, it enables frustrated SPs to disclose their problems, which in turn lead others to provide encouragement, advice and analysis of the initiators' situations. Those forms of support helps SPs in distress to make sense of their experiences, take informed actions, and lessen tensions on the one hand, and nurtured the SP-seafarer relationship on the other. Secondly, it makes possible for SPs to express their reflections and stories and have them appreciated and valued by others. Thirdly, writing diaries enables SPs to record their less mundane activities, vent their feelings, and also attract others' comforting words. In making these postings, as we mentioned, SPs are, to an extent, performing themselves to attract attention. I shall discuss this next.

6.3 Enjoying each other's company

The HCS is also a social place, where SPs meet and interact with each other across time and space. Besides seeking emotional and informational support, it appears that

SPs also come here for sociable purposes, in other words, to partake of others' company.

For this reason, some SPs regarded visiting the HCS as a 'leisure activity'. For example, two informants of the study suggested:

> Besides that it provides me some information, I think that this website is a leisure place for me. [Blue-Elf]

> [Visiting the HCS] is a leisure activity. [Crystal-Heart]

Therefore, the HCS also provides sociable pleasure, which is derived from at least two sources: 'chit-chat' and self-performing.

6.3.1 'Chit-chat'

'Chit-chat' here does not mean instant conversation. Instead, it refers to discussions of general topics in forums, which seems to serve no other purposes than providing sociable pleasure. Eight of the twenty sampled threads from *Communication between Seafarers and Seafarer-Partners* can be categorised as general discussion postings. One thread was about a game, the aim of which was to predict the state of a couple's relationships (whether they are happy or not) based on the number of days between two individuals' birthdays. The author explained to her audience:

> If it matches your situation, you can smile now. If it is not, do not feel gloomy. It is just for fun. Do not take it seriously!

Among the other seven, two were about relationships in general, three was about seafarers and their job, one was about extra-marital relationships, and one was about a birthday. Except the last one, all the other five postings explicitly invited others to contribute their views and opinions. Interestingly, even in 'chit-chat', the general topics were still revolving around relationships. Relationships, then, seems to be the paramount theme in the HCS for SPs.

'Chit-chat' is another form of participation. When visiting the HCS, many SPs may not have problems or informational needs. They just want to spend some time there. Some SPs may like reading and browsing the website silently and passively. In contrast, others may prefer to participate actively, interacting with and engaging with others. Maybe for this reason, they initiate 'chit-chat'. In a sense, rather than

marginalising and silencing those who are not in a difficult situation, 'chit-chat' provides them with a channel to participate.

'Chit-chat' arguably produces a more lively and colourful environment. It serves to generate more discussion topics, which in turn engage more members to participate in the discussion. Sociable pleasure, to a large extent, derives from playing and talking with each other, no matter how insignificant the game is and how trivial the topics are. Without any animated activities, a social gathering may be dreadful rather than enjoyable. Similarly, lively discussions in the HCS contribute to entertain and activate participants. Presumably, when there are more SPs joining in and more topics to discuss, the environment are more stimulating and enjoyable. Though 'chit-chat' topics may be banal, it is those mundane things that make the HCS more like a social place. After all, everyday life is supposed to be routine and ordinary, and in face-to-face interactions humans engage in 'small talk' or what sociolinguists call 'phatic talk' (Edwards and Westgate, 1987).

In order to acquire more sociable pleasure, SPs tended to choose busy forums to visit where there were more activities. Diana, for example, who also participated in another seafaring website, preferred making postings in the HCS for the latter was busier:

> As to chatting and making posting, the HCS is the best place, since there are more people.

In a similar vein, Smiling-Face favoured more active forums:

> [In the forum which I favour] There are more people and more activities. Sometimes, we like to go to busy and active places.

Participation in the forums is disembodied and mediated by texts, yet, this does not prevent SPs from noticing where there are more participants congregating. The quantity of new postings indicates the popularity of one forum. The more popular it is, obviously, the more participants it has attracted. It is also the case that discussion in forums is asynchronous. This does not fail, however, to keep SPs engaged. What they interact with is postings of other participants, instead of others directly. As long as there are new and interesting postings, SPs will be actively engaged in reading and replying to these postings and initiating their own. This, arguably, gives SPs a sense of being together with others.

It is not only 'chit-chat' postings, however, that provide sociable pleasure. In fact, except those explicitly seeking advice, all other postings may serve to provide pleasure and entertainment. While the chief concern of advice seeking postings is to get help, the initiators of other forms of postings may explicitly or implicitly aim at engaging others in discussions and sociable 'conversation'. To achieve this, SP initiators may need to perform well.

6.3.2 Performance of the self

To a certain extent, SPs' making of postings is a kind of performance. The presence of a large number of other participants provides an audience. Implicitly, SPs may hope to draw the audience's attention and invoke as many replies as possible. All informants admitted that they would be very excited if their postings attracted plenty of replies, as one informants stated:

> Interviewer: How do you feel when your threads get lots of replies?
>
> Blue-Elf: I feel excited.
>
> Interviewer: What if very few give you replies?
>
> Blue-Elf: I will be looking forward to replies and going to have a check quite often.

The number of replies, arguably, indicates the extent to which participants are interested in the topic. Each reply is a confirmation of and a form of applause for the 'performance'. In everyday life, when we intentionally 'perform' an activity but it is ignored by everybody, we are likely to feel awkward and out of place. Similarly in cyberspace, receiving few or no replies, the initiator may feel excluded and at a loss, though without others' embodied and synchronous presence such feeling may not be sharp and acute. On the contrary, when one SP's postings attract lots of responses, she may feel successful and flattered, since this shows that others are supporting her.

Moreover, a successful performance is also rewarded with 'virtual money', and maybe 'experience points' as indicated in sub-section 4.2.1, which help promote them to a higher rank. Though most informants asserted that what matters for them most of all, was actual participation rather than rank. A few, however, did want to be promoted. The promotion gives some SPs a sense of achievement. Though not material, it nevertheless may satisfy them psychologically. Crystal-Heart, for example, advocated:

> Q: There is a ranking system working in this website. How do you think this will affect

members' participation?

A: Yes.

Q: How?

A: If one's rank is low, s/he has less power. Everybody has vanity. The higher your rank is, the higher your reputation is.

Q: Do you think members would take actions to enhance their reputation?

A: Yes, of course. I do.

Q: How do you do?

A: Making more postings and canvassing others to reply to my threads.

The rank system, to a certain extent, makes participation game like. Winners achieve high ranks and acquire more privileges, such as having bigger message boxes. Moreover, winning itself can be satisfactory and enjoyable, and it brings about excitement.

Good performance produces sociable enjoyment. It stimulates others to participate and contribute, which creates a refreshing environment. In friendships, entertaining skills are highly regarded (Jerrome, 1984). In this group of SPs, arguably, performing skills make each other's company more enjoyable.

6.3.3 Alleviating social isolation

The companionship SPs provide for each other appears to have empowered them to reduce the sense of social isolation. 'Building social bridges', which includes increasing activities and expanding social networks, is a coping strategy for combating loneliness (Rokach and Brock, 1998). It has been found that British seafarers' wives commonly used two ways to mitigate isolation: keeping busy and making use of early-established social networks by living close to their families (Thomas, 2003). Use of the HCS can be said to provide both strategies. On the one hand, it gave SP participants 'a thing to do' and kept them busy, for instance, Flying-Fish stated:

> I've got a place where I like to visit everyday. I feel that there is a thing that I need to do. I've got a thing to do.

Another informant, Mermaid, preferred staying in the office where she had access to the Internet after working hours to going home when her boyfriend was at sea. She said:

When he [her boyfriend] is home, I leave the office on time. This is to say that I fly home when it is time to get off work. When he is onboard, I am like a single person. When it is time to get off work, I stay there when my colleagues have left, since I do not have access to the Internet from home... [By participating,] I feel that I have killed time.

Both informants' words suggest that participating on the HCS provided them an extra activity that they liked to do. By doing so, many SPs killed what otherwise might be empty and lonely time. In another context – prisons where time can be extremely empty for the inmates, Medlicott's (1999) study shows that 'keeping busy' helped some prisoners to overcome suicidal behaviour and feelings. Prisoners and SPs, of course, are very different. As we saw in Section 5.1, however, the separation time can also be empty (and lonely) for SPs. In this respect, the ability to cope with and kill empty time seems to be also related to SPs' well-being. On the other hand, the HCS enables SPs to expand social networks and to make friends with others, as we will see in Chapter 7.

Thus, the HCS also provides SPs a sociable place, where participants enjoy each other's company. This adds an extra sense of pleasure to SPs in their mundane life which may contain lots of pressure and problems.

6.4 The generalised relationship

We have discussed three major ways of participation in the public space – forums and the diary space – in the HCS: informational support, emotional exchange, and sociable engagement. Insofar as we have discussed these three forms of interactions, it is in the form of general and non-individualised relationships. This is not to say that in the public space SPs do not do personal relationships. The latter, however, will be discussed in the next chapter. Here, we only focus on the generalised relationship.

It appears that the generalised relationship in the HCS has either instrumental ends or pleasure/participation or both as its object(s). Some SPs search for information or seek comfort when they are in need; others participate as a form of entertainment and pleasure. When they express their inner thoughts and love stories, they may focus more on the self, either to express the self or to attract others' attention. As such, when they receive no replies, they may feel disappointed. Though SPs are willing to give help, they tend to do so for the sake of participation. When SPs provide

emotional comfort to the frustrated others, it seems that they care about those others. If we recall that they do 'free emotion work', however, this caring may be fleeting indeed. As a result, the generalised relationship sometimes can appear to be surprisingly banal. Occasionally, a thread that had passed into oblivion and 'sunk' to the bottom of the thread list for around a year or so suddenly became revived by a reply[24]. Following that, other participants might join in the discussion. The initiator of the thread, however, might have left the website for good, and therefore the newly offered advice or opinions would not matter for her any more. Behind the veil of the supposed care, then, is the will of participation.

This is not to say, however, that this 'generalised' form of relationship is bad or negative. On the contrary, it can be very positive. It is the will of participation that motivates SPs to give of their available resources – information, their own experiences, sympathy, encouragement, comforting words, different perspectives, and advice – to others in need. From the receivers' point of view, there is a sense of empowerment since they acquire what they need and feel that they have somebody to fall back on. Rain, a 25-year-old school teacher who was a new member and had not yet developed personal relationships with others described her initial impressions:

> I just found it [the HCS] this September... As yet I have not made any friends. In fact, my impression is that everybody is caring in this website.

This makes it easier for frustrated SPs to confide and alleviate their pressures and tensions, and to make informed decisions. In economy, Adam Smith argued that the pursuing of self-interest, acting as an invisible hand, contributes to the accumulation of national wealth. Similarly, as a by-product or 'an unintended consequence' (Giddens, 1979; 1984), the will of participation in the HCS generates a social network, which enables SPs to pool their available resources to assist each other in difficult times, to appreciate, value, and confirm each other's attitude and feelings, and to accompany each other and lessen the sense of social isolation. We will see in section 7.5 that this social network together with personal relationships contribute to improve SPs' well-being.

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[24] The HCS does not delete outdated threads as some BBS websites do.

Chapter 7 Participation and Empowerment in Friendships

Besides interacting in the public space of the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* (HCS), a large number of seafarer-partners (SPs) also engage with each other in private domains, such as private messages, chat rooms, and offline gatherings, which is likely to evolve into personal relationships. This chapter focuses on private exchanges and the resultant personal relationships. In general, participants tend to term private relationships[25] in the website loosely as online friendships. We will use this term in this chapter regardless of how superficial or deep such relationships are.

The first section focuses on the ways in which SPs initiate friendships. In the process of initiating friendships, we will see that instead of a placeless space, the offline geography is reproduced in the HCS. In the second section, the discussion turns to how SPs do friendships online, while in the third section we will shift the focus from the online to the offline settings and see how SPs embed their friendship in the offline world. In the process of doing friendship, we will find in these two sections that support from online friends empowers SPs to cope with their daily problems more effectively. However, online friendship also has its limitations, which we will discuss in section four. The final section considers the benefit of online relationships.

7.1 Initiating online friendships

Given the fact that SPs are likely to have difficulties in communicating their experiences to people around them in the offline world, they are willing to develop personal relationships with similar others online in the HCS. Green-Pepper, for example, a married SP with a baby daughter, stated:

> I want to make some friends who have similar life experiences, with whom it is easy to communicate through this website.

While people make friends by chance in the offline world, Carte (2005) points out that online friend-making tends to be more proactive. This is also the case on the HCS.

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[25] This is not to say that SPs only maintain and develop their friendships in private spaces, as we will see in section 7.2.4 that they pay particular attention to their friends' postings and diary entries.

There appear to be four ways of initiating friendships. The most explicit way is 'recruiting'. In the threads sampled for this study, one is titled as '*Liaoning²⁶ SPs please sign in*'. The SP initiator tried to meet other SPs, who were from her province – Liaoning – in this thread. There were also several postings doing almost the same, such as '*Are there any friends from Guangxi*', and '*Are there any Qingdao SPs*'²⁷. These authors were attempting to 'recruit' SP friends who lived in their proximity.

It has been claimed that the Internet is a placeless space. Lash (2001) argues that in the age of technology we live technological forms of life, which are disembedded and lifted out of any particular place. He employed the Internet as a good example to illustrate this point. In making friends in the HCS, as we saw in the last paragraph, however, offline geography is reproduced and SPs search for potential friends who live nearby. As Allan and Adams (1998) point out, friendship is between people with similarities. In the HCS where SPs are able to 'meet' each other despite geographical barriers, it appears that living nearby becomes one similarity and a common identity based on which friendship is more likely to develop. Durkheim (1984) observed that when one meets his fellow country men in a foreign state he/she feel the bond to them stronger. This seems to be the case in the HCS: when SPs from different places 'meet' each other, living in the same place may turn out to be a bonding force and a reason for potential friendship. In this sense, the ability of cyberspace to transcend time and space can make its dwellers more aware of where they are from, instead of erasing geography. Another reason for some SPs to emphasise physical places is because it is easier for them to meet face to face (we will discuss this point in section 7.3). As a response to the kind of postings mentioned in the last paragraph, the managers in the autumn of 2006 set up the following new forums: *Shanghai SP Forum, Shandong SP Forum, Liaoning SP Forum, Jiangsu SP Forum* and *Hubei SP Forum*²⁸. Thus, the reproducing of offline geography became 'official' in the HCS.

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²⁶ Liaoning is the name of a Chinese province.

²⁷ Guangxi and Qingdao are the names of a Chinese province and a city respectively.

²⁸ Shanghai, Shandong, Liaoning, Jiangsu, and Hubei are five major seafaring provinces.

The second way of initiating friendship is 'selling oneself'. For example, in one thread about visiting a ship in Shanghai, one SP in Shanghai asked others to add her as an online friend:

> I am in Shanghai. Please add my MSN – weil23@hotmail.com. [Fieldnote, 01/08/2006]

The third way is friend searching. An individual checks who is online and reads their registered information, and then sends messages 'proactively' to those whom she feels like making friends with. For example:

> Sometimes, I wanted to get some information and to communicate with other SPs. Then I had a check [of their registered information and found out some details] and then added their QQ numbers. [Lily]

The Fourth way, probably also the most common way, of initiating friendship is that by reading postings here, one SP identifies with the author and then sends her a responsive message. For instance:

> If I see, or I feel vaguely [by reading her postings], that we have common experiences or we live close to each other, or we have similar character, I would send her messages and then tell her my contact details. But normally, I would not tell her my contact details first, but only let her know where I live and my QQ number, and then we can keep in touch. [Mermaid]

Thus, SPs' writing postings can be regarded as a way of opening themselves and implicitly, if not explicitly, inviting others to become familiar and identify with them. The voluntary and unsolicited openness and invitation certainly make them the easy targets of friend-seekers, while in the offline world one has to take time to engage others in order to acquire some information from them. Writing and reading diaries perhaps serve this purpose better. If an individual writes a public diary regularly, she presents her life to the audience continuously, though not fully, since the diaries gradually reveal things about her, such as her job, her family, her neighbours, her friends, and her daily activities. This continuity helps to make the diary self more wholesome. By following her diaries, others can feel that they live in her life and knew her very well. For example, one SP wrote in her diary:

> I have been in HCS for over one year. So far, I have become familiar with many sisters. Though we are far away from each other [geographically], we know what each other is doing today, since we are writing diaries here everyday, disclosing happiness and difficulties ... [Fieldnote, 13/01/2006]

Similarly, Butterfly said in the interview:

[In the diary space] there are familiar people and I can feel their real lives there.

Thus, in the audience's eyes, regular public diary writers appeared to be concrete, rather than bodiless, nameless and unfamiliar. Their ups and downs, and daily lives were shared with others. This sense of familiarity was certainly conducive to friend-making.

If the first three ways of recruiting friendships aim at the target straight away, the fourth one presumes that the initiator is somewhat familiar with her targeted potential friends. It is possible to know a lot about a particular SP by reading her postings, diary entries and registered personal information. From the personal information, one may know her age, job and place of living. Following her diary entries, one gradually becomes aware of a slice of her daily life, such as her family, friends and neighbours, and her experiences and feelings. We can see this from the above quotations. Even if this SP does not write diaries, her postings reveal her concerns and experiences. These, however, take time to write about and display and therefore require active participation. She is like an author of novels, to portray and develop her 'character' and situation. In the case of this particular SP, she needs to write quite often to make herself visible and to reinforce her presence in others' minds continuously. If she only writes once in several months, her name probably would have disappeared in the others' memory before it reappears again. From the side of the friendship initiator, she needs to visit the website quite often in order to learn to differentiate who is who. When, in the offline world, we walk on a street where we see other people's faces and bodies, we can hardly recall their faces at the end of the street. Only after we have met one repetitively in a period of time can we remember this person. Equally, only when one comes across the other's writings several times can one notice and remember that particular other online. Thus, Parks and Floyds' (1996) study of online friendships suggest that in news groups, the duration of participation and the frequency of contribution are the two most important factors in predicting whether one has developed a friendship online or not.

The four methods of initiating friendship – recruiting, selling oneself, searching, and messaging the identified others – empower SPs to find potential friends more directly and more easily, since they are able to advertise and make available their own

information and search others' profiles in the HCS more than they are able to offline. Certainly, initiating is the first step. Next, we turn to the activities of doing friendships.

7.2 Doing friendships online

Friendship has several forms and assumes different characteristics. In section 2.3.2, we discussed Aristotle's three types of friendships: instrumental, sociable, and good (or emotional) friendship. Spencer and Pahl (2006) differentiate between 'simple friendship' and 'complex friendship' – while the former (simple friendship) is mainly based on one type of interaction, the latter is more complex and involves several forms of interaction. Instrumental and sociable friendships are more likely to be simple, in the sense that the interactions involved tend to focus exclusively on either utility or fun. In contrast, the good/emotional friendship usually manifests multiple modes of relating: besides emotional help and confiding, it may also provide practical and informational support as well as good company. From simple to complex friendship, there seems to be a progressive development, though perhaps only a few simple friendships can grow into complex ones. The latter, arguably, are closer and more intimate. Within this framework, this and the next section will provide an account of what kinds of friendship SPs are doing and how they do them.

At the beginning of doing online friendship, SPs normally send and reply to private messages online in the HCS. It takes a much longer time, however, to send and receive messages online in the HCS than chatting in other spaces like, for example, MSN or QQ[29]. In a sense, it is more like an exchange of emails than instant communication. As a result, most SPs would exchange MSN or QQ numbers in the first few private messages and move into these other two speedier settings in order to continue 'doing friendship'. Some SPs, who have already known other parties' MSN or QQ numbers by reading others' registered personal information or postings that reveal such information, may start friendship directly by leaving messages or by chatting in MSN or QQ. For convenience, I shall refer to the friendship that shifts to other online settings as QQ friendship[30]. First, however, let us discuss friendship that

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[29] QQ is a computer program for instant online chatting. It is similar to MSN and ICQ.

[30] More often than not, SPs use QQ instead of MSN, since QQ is developed in China.

remains confined within the setting of the HCS, which is referred to as 'message friendship'.

7.2.1 Message friendship

Though most online friendships move to other settings, a few remain confined in the HCS and the involved parties communicate mainly through private messages on an occasional basis. Let us call them 'message friendships'. Such friendships are very limited, and may end even before they begin and slip back into the generalised relationship, which can be regarded as failed attempts of developing friendship. Very few message friendships appear to survive. Among thirty interviewees, only Flying-Fish mainly maintained her friendships through messages. This friendship seems mainly for a sociable purpose. When online friends see each other online in the HCS, they may 'say' hello to each other through messages and engage in a small talk to have a lively atmosphere. They also pay particular attention to their friends' postings and diary entries. For example, Flying-Fish commented on her friends' diaries quite often. When noticing her friends in (emotional) trouble from diaries or postings, Flying-Fish would send comments (on their diary entries) or reply to their postings to show solidarity. Though such comments or replies may involve a component of emotional care, this kind of affective engagement tends to be one-off instead of continuous and long-term.

Flying-Fish also helped her friends in job related matters. She was working for an import-export trading company and was very experienced in this job. Several of her friends were also doing this kind of work. When her friends revealed work associated problems in their diaries, Flying-Fish would offer advice. For example, one of her friends wrote in the diary one day:

> I have been told that the container of my cargo was not put onboard the ship that left this afternoon. We have booked the stowage space in advance. I do not know why. Maybe the space was so tight that my container was squeezed out. X shipping company is too disgusting! They should not discriminate against us for having just one container ... [Fieldnote, 05/02/2007]

Having read this, Flying-Fish commented:

> It is very common for A shipping company to drop containers. Moreover, you will be charged of the fees incurred thereby. If not appointed by the cargo receiver, it is better

not to use A. Its service in China is very bad.

In general, message friendship is likely to be simple and its medium has limitations in supporting continuous conversations. To develop more intimate relationships, SPs appear to have shifted to other settings, such as QQ, for constant and perhaps more intensive engagement.

7.2.2 Dyadic QQ friendship

Although most online friendships move to QQ, it does not necessarily mean that QQ friendship is more intimate than the message one. When two people meet and have a chat in the offline world, they do not necessarily become close friends even though they may see each other often afterward. Similarly, one or even several QQ chat episodes do not necessarily lead to a lasting friendship. Diana, for example, said:

> It is not that chatting with every SP online is happy...With some SPs, I feel like I have nothing really to talk about with them.

If there was 'nothing to talk about', certainly there was no need to continue the relationship. Though continued, some QQ friendships are shallow and superficial indeed. For example, both Butterfly and Breeze perceived their online friendships with other SPs to be 'as bland as water':

> At the moment, our friendship is as bland as water and we are very polite in conversation.
> [Breeze]

In Breeze's opinion, interactions online did not provide an adequate context for getting to know others and therefore one could only know part of others' stories. Having perceived that she had not known much about her online friends, Breeze felt that she could only politely provide listening and understanding ears, rather than offensive, sharp or critical words:

> When chatting with family members and friends in real life, because we have a good knowledge of each other, we can speak our minds, express opinions and thoughts thoroughly. Even though words are too strong [sometimes], we can forgive each other. But facing the virtual Internet world, there are many things about people and stories that we do not know much. Even though both parties can chat as friends, this is just on the surface, because in their internal worlds, they are strangers and semi-closed. This determines that chat online can only be 'chat in peace'. The expression of some issues is always warm and mutually acceptable, because most of them time, the other party only needs a listener and sympathiser, rather than a critical mentor.

Polite civility appears to characterise interactions for Breeze. Her attitude is contrary to the common perception that the anonymous online environment encourages verbal attacks (Jordan, 2001). Such 'bland' chat arguably meant to sustain a pleasant atmosphere – they did not argue, only 'chatted in peace'. It is similar to a hello or a discussion of the weather when two acquaintances meet and engage each other in a phatic talk – it is out of politeness. Thus, for Breeze, her online friends were more like acquaintances. Not surprisingly, neither Breeze nor Butterfly chatted with their online friends often though they had access to the Internet daily. Such friendship did not need much investment. It was not just simple but superficial.

It seems that not just time and participation, but also personality factors have impacts on making friends online. At the time of the interview, Breeze was a relatively new participant. Yet Butterfly was one of the earliest participants and had been writing diaries regularly and made around one hundred postings. This does not support Parks and Floyds' (1996) tentative suggestion that personality factors do not matter much in terms of developing personal relationships online.

The example of Breeze and Butterfly also suggests that for some people the online environment has its limitations in developing intimate relationships. Mesch's (2005: 2; see also Mesch and Talmud, 2006) comparative study of adolescents' online and offline social relationship suggests that '[f]riendships originated in the Internet are perceived as less close and supportive because they are relatively new and online friends are involved in fewer joint activities and fewer topics of discussion'. For Breeze and Butterfly, this appeared to be the case. Since they only communicated with others online around issues of being a SP and they did not do other activities together, Breeze felt that she knew very little about others. As a result, such relationships were felt to be rather shallow. In section 7.3, we will see that if online friendships are able to be grounded in offline settings, they tend to become more intimate and stronger. From another angle, this reflects the constraints of the online environment in terms of doing friendships in some cases.

Albeit with limitations, the online setting nevertheless also has its advantages. As shown in Chapter 5, SPs may not be able to meet other SPs in their everyday offline lives and find it difficult to confide their feelings to their offline non-seafaring friends.

In this context, the same identity, the mediating effect of the Internet, and the 'distancing effect' (Kendall, 2002) online, encourage some SPs to open themselves more in the HCS and seem to have facilitated friend-making between many SPs. Such friendships could become intimate and of a confiding nature when they moved to the QQ setting. For example, Rose described some of her QQ friendships as such:

> With regard to very intimate ones [online friends], I have two or three. This kind of friendship is very interesting and strange. Sometimes when I meet emotional problems or big events, I would turn to them first. With regard to my secrets and real emotions, sometimes I would not tell my family members or friends in real life, but I would confide to them. Though they are far away and beyond my reach, they are so friendly and amiable.

This is very similar to some online friendships that Baym (2000) and Carte (2005) described in their studies into online communities and which were emotionally close though physically far. A high level of trust is involved in such intimate QQ friendship – SPs turn to these friends first and feel safe to disclose their private problems; they believe that these friends will help to share the problems rather than make them more vulnerable. Certainly, not all QQ friendships become so intimate. Rose, for example, only perceived two or three of a dozen of her QQ friends as close ones.

These intimate friendships appear complex – involved parties not just confide and share their problems, but also seek useful information and entertain each other. Smiling-Face and Dove, for instance, made friends with each other in the HCS. Dove regarded Smiling-Face as a soul-mate, while Smiling-Face called Dove *sidang*, which in Chinese literally means a close friendship in which both parties do not separate till death. Besides discussing issues related to their seafarer-partners, they were also looking to be engaged by each other. Smiling-Face stated in the interview:

> [When my *sidang* and I met online in the HCS, we will chat in QQ. However,] we would continue surfing this website [the HCS]; we read postings in the HCS while comment them in QQ. I will say: have a look at this postings... How do you think my reply? etc. It is funny.

Thus, in doing the QQ friendship, Smiling-Face and Dove made fun of materials in the HCS and entertained each other through discussing and evaluating postings. Apparently, they enjoyed each other's (virtual) presence. Although Smiling-Face and Dove might be alone in their own rooms/houses, the online company they provided

with each other seems to have produced a lively atmosphere, which arguably alleviated the sense of loneliness and emptiness.

The features and advantages of the online setting mentioned earlier are so conducive to exploring the emotional issues between QQ friends that some SPs even start confiding in the first encounter with their friends (in such cases, initiating and doing friendships seems to overlap). For example, two SPs wrote in their diary entries:

> For the first time I chatted to midnight with a SP last night. I felt so good, because I made friends with another SP and the topics we talked were what I was concerned. It felt so good to disclose feelings with somebody. Otherwise I could only be unduly preoccupied... It is so good to have friends in the HCS. I should make more. [Fieldnotes, 21/11/2005]

> Yesterday evening I met Lora [another SP participant of the HCS] online. I did not even want to go home because of chatting with her ... Lora's consolation warmed my lonely heart. My bad mood has gone away! [Fieldnote, 29/06/2006]

In the offline world, Spencer and Pahl (2006) suggest that confiding and emotional friendship is complex and implies several types of relating; and that it is progressively developed from simple ones which may include only one mode of interaction. From the above two quotes, however, we can see that in the online setting SPs were able to enter a friendship involving an affective component directly and quickly. It may even be argued that this confiding (QQ) friendship was simple, since it had only involved one mode of relating — sharing feelings — up to that time in doing the friendship (though it might grow to contain other forms of interaction, such as instrumental and sociable, at a later stage).

7.2.3 Group QQ friendship

Apart from doing online friendship dyadically, SPs also do it in groups. Data suggests that there are many friend-groups in the HCS. These are commonly in the form of QQ groups. One participant can set up a group account on QQ and then invite her friends to join this group. While they are chatting in the group, every member can 'listen' and 'speak'. It is as if they were talking together in a room. At least three informants, Yangtze-Girl, Golden-Eye, and Mermaid, were in such groups. For example, Yangtze-Girl said:

> We run a chat group called Six-longing-SP group and one Shanghai SP chatting group,

and a chatting group of Home of Chinese Seafarers.

These groups were not static. Rather, they were expansive and invited new friends to join in. For example, in the above quote from Yangtze-Girl, the group was called 'six-longing-SPs'; two months later in the face-to-face interview, the group became 'seven-longing-SPs':

> There are many QQ groups in the HCS. With those friends of mine, we have a Seven-longing-SPs group.

In these groups, more often than not, SPs talked about mundane and trivial things that were happening around them. Yangtze-Girl, Golden-Eye, and Mermaid were all working in offices. On working days, they would be online in their QQ groups. When they had spare time, they would initiate a chat.

> When we have nothing to do in the office, we will have chat, discussing some topics that we are concerned with...... We are online on the QQ group everyday. When one is free, she would say why nobody is talking and so and so. Then others will come and start talking. It makes us feel happy. [Golden-Eye]

> If there is not much to say, we would talk about weather. We are just online in the office and do not have much time. Normally, during lunch time or when we have time, we would say hello to each other and talk a bit about everyday life, when he will come back, his route, and so on. Although these things are trivial, we know each others' living conditions by these kinds information. [Mermaid]

Thus, the group chat is more like a lively conversation when several friends in an offline setting gather together. The discussion topic may be insignificant. Yet, the chat itself is a way of doing friendship; it confirms and reaffirms that they are in a group and serves to reinforce group solidarity; it provides these SPs with a sense of belonging. Through the group conversation, they also acquire more information about each other and develop the friendship. Furthermore, the discussion may somewhat add some 'fresh air' to their working places and provide a temporary escape from routine jobs.

The frequent maintenance and development of group friendship through 'small/phatic talk' help to make the friendship more intimate and complex. When one SP in the group experiences problems and feel bad, the friendship will become the vehicle for

accessing emotional and even material help. For example, Yangtze-Girl had experienced this:

> Last year, I met some unhappy matters both in work and in home. He was not home. It is SPs here, and other sisters' assistance and care that led me to get out of those days with strength! At that time, Mrs Bean even wrote a postal letter to me and gave me a cake voucher worth RMB 100!

As such, group friendship provides sociable pleasure in normal situations; when someone meets emotional difficulties, however, those friends do not hesitate to offer care and comfort to the distressed. Both Yangtze-Girl and Mermaid suggested that such friendship was 'sincere'. For this reason, Mermaid would disclose private things to her online friends and her friends would give her comfort:

> I think sincere is the word [to describe the friendship online the HCS]. I mean that we are very sincere to each other. We do not hesitate [to disclose what happened] as we do with offline friends. For example, if I did something wrong today, I would tell them without fear that they would laugh at me. Then they would comfort me and tell me that this does not matter. In real life, however, even though we are bosom friends, I do not tell them some things which I would disclose to a SP. I feel that our relationships [between seafarer-partners] are special. In brief, it is one word – sincere.

Group friendship, then, can become complex – friends provide each other with not just company, but also sympathetic listening ears, comforting words, and practical assistance.

7.2.4 Doing QQ friendship in the HCS and the morality of online friendship

Although QQ friendship (either dyadic or group-wise) has been shifted to another setting, an element of the friendship continues to be performed in the HCS. Friends pay particular attention to each other's postings and diaries. With regard to replying to postings, Yangtze-Girl for example, suggested:

> To those that I am not familiar with, I will also reply, but less. If she is familiar, normally I will reply to her every thread. It is as if I should give her moral support.

A sense of moral duty or obligation appears to exist between friends (both message and QQ, but might not include superficial ones) in the HCS. Spencer and Pahl's (2006) empirical study of friendship in British suggests that friendship implies a morality, which includes a sense of allegiance and commitment. This morality is evident in Yangtze-Girl's words – she was loyal to her friends and always supported her friends'

writing/performance. In the HCS, SPs are likely to keep an eye continuously on her friends' postings when they are in trouble. For example, Mona-Lisa's friend Katy felt that her boyfriend was unfaithful to her and thus made a posting to complain of this. Having noticed Katy's posting, Mona-Lisa chatted with her in QQ and gave her comfort in the first day. The second day Mona-Lisa continued paying attention to Katy. She wrote in her diary that day:

> Once I logged into the HCS, I started looking for Katy's posting, but could not find it. Maybe Katy has deleted it and the misunderstanding [between her and her boyfriend] is gone. If this is the case, it would be great ... [06/10/2006]

Besides loyalty, then, the morality of the friendship between Mona-Lisa and Katy also involved a sense of care – caring each other's well-being. This care was not one-off but continuous. Certainly, not all QQ friendships contain this dimension of morality. It tends to exist only in intimate and complex ones.

From Mona-Lisa and Katy's friendship, and also from Yangtze-Girl's group friendship in sub-section 7.2.3, it is evident that doing emotional friendship is at the same time, doing emotion work; and that the latter is likely to nurture the SP-seafarer relationship (in Mona-Lisa's case, she would feel great if her friend Katy's relationship returned to normal). The morality of care manifested in friendship, then, tends to be a morality of (constant) nurturing of the other.

Because of its morality, friendship is more rewarding and satisfactory than the generalised relationship. The former can be long-lasting and the friendship is concrete in the mind, which assures an individual that she is not alone. In contrast, the generalised relationships tend to be fleeting and generalised others are anonymous. Online observation revealed that when a SP replied to her friend's postings, she was likely to address her friend by the net-name, while when the two were not familiar, the replier normally did not address the initiator or addressed her as 'LZ' (means 'the initiator' in Chinese cyberspace language). As such, friendship assumes closeness and a sense of human feeling, whereas the generalised relationship is distant and impersonal. Furthermore, presumed to be loyal, friends can be counted on (a friend is the one who is always there for you), while generalised others cannot be taken for granted to offer support. Given the sense of commitment to, and responsibility for, each other, that these participants appear to feel, it may be suggested that the emotion

work involved in doing this type of friendship is more effective than that in the generalised relationship. The nurturing work done by these friends clearly arises from the attachment they have formed and so tends to be more sustained and continuous as the example of Mona-Lisa and Katy shows.

In this section, we have seen that the HCS empowers some SPs to establish more rewarding relationships – friendships – with others. SPs do their friendships in several settings: private message, QQ, and in the forums and the diary space of the HCS. The friendships range from simple to complex, providing SPs with fun, an avenue for confiding and exploring emotional issues, material help, or a combination of these. Besides loyalty, the intimate friendship in the HCS also manifests a morality of constantly caring about friends' well-being and nurturing the SP-seafarer relationship. We have also seen, however, that some SPs felt their online friendships were shallow and 'bland' rather than rewarding. On the one hand, this may indicate that personality plays a role in making friends. On the other, it suggests that the online environment has its limitations – besides disembodied chatting, SPs can hardly do any other joint activities with their friends online. Maybe for this reason, many SPs chose to embody their online friendships by shifting them offline.

7.3 Moving friendships offline

Some SPs were doing their friendships both online and offline. Online friends shifting offline has been well documented (Baym, 1998; Carte, 2005; Kendall, 2002; Parks and Floyds, 1996). Some SP participants of the HCS also met their online friends physically and attended gatherings. These occurred on at least three occasions. First, they gather regularly if they live near. Smiling-Face and Dove lived in Southwest Shanghai. Since meeting within the HCS, they had taken the friendship offline and met regularly on weekends. Smiling-Face mentioned a lot in her diaries her weekend gatherings with Dove, for example:

> It was raining again. I was waken up by the alarm but did not want to get up. The rain might save me. I rang Dove immediately to ask her whether we should cancel the gathering. The outcome was that I had to board the bus to the gathering place... After lunch, we went to Karaoke, and then afternoon tea in a Pizzahut, and then went to AQING restaurant for noodles. So happy! [Fieldnote, 23/07/2006]

Similarly, Crystal-Heart, Caroline, Jessica, and several others lived in the same region of Shanghai. They also met quite often for shopping or dining together. Crystal-Heart was very proud of this network and the fact that she made many friends online in the HCS. During the interview gathering in Shanghai, she told other informants happily:

> My colleague asked me: 'You have just come to this city for two years, where do you get so many friends from? This weekend you go shopping with some friends, that weekends you have a party with other friends? I have been here for three years, but have far fewer friends than you.

These words on the one hand suggest that her colleagues admired and envied her because she had more friends than they did. On the other, they imply that Crystal-Heart felt successful and confident. From this, we can also see the significance of social networks in general and friendships in particular – a sense of belonging makes individuals more positive. We will return to this in section 7.5.

Secondly, on several special occasions, some participants initiate and organise gatherings. For example, on the first Maritime Day which was on July 10th of 2005, a gathering was arranged in Shanghai. Fifteen SPs either alone or accompanied by their partners and children attended it. To facilitate my research fieldwork, the managers of the HCS and Crystal-Heart arranged two gatherings (see sub-section 3.3.3). Such activities as shopping, dining and gathering are obviously for interacting socially with others. Yet these arguably reinforce friendships, as Mesch (2005) suggests that different joint activities help to develop friendships further.

The third occasion for 'gathering' is when one goes to visit a ship in a port or to do business in another city where online friends may live. Several SP participants mentioned this in their postings and diaries. For instance, one SP met her friend, who came to visit her boyfriend's ship, and wrote:

> I met with Little-Angel today and felt so happy.... It is not easy for her to come to visit the ship – from Guilin to Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and then Xiamen, and today to Zhangzhou. [Fieldnote, 27/05/2006].

Another one had a business trip to another city and met her online friend there:

> I went to Fuzhou [for a business trip]... and met my online friend Annie. 'The Internet is amazing!' we started our talk with this! [Fieldnote, 31/10/2006]

Online friendships thus can be instrumental. When SPs need to go to other cities and if they have online friends there, they can have a free local guide, good company, and even an offer of accommodation. The several quotes above also indicate that physically meeting and doing friendship is exciting and brings lots of happiness and fun for SPs.

Certainly, geography plays an important role in gatherings. Except for the third type of occasion, meetings are normally continued for SPs who live in close proximity, at least in the same city or region. There are many SPs, however, living far away from others and therefore lack the opportunity to participate in face-to-face meetings. One SP complained that she could not meet others because of distance, in a thread where others mentioned a particular gathering:

> I have never come across any SPs in Beijing. Having read how happy you were in the gathering, I feel jealous...Welcome you to Beijing – I feel so lonely here! [Fieldnote, 31/07/2006]

Clearly this SP felt excluded and isolated even more when she saw the discussion of this gathering while she could not attend. Witnessing such a discussion reminded her that she was in a virtual space and could not realise a face-to-face meeting.

Though some SPs did not take geographic factors into consideration when choosing online friends, others did. Some individuals admitted that they would be happier to make friends with those who they were able to meet in the near future. For example, Mermaid stated:

> All of them are from Jiangsu and nearby regions, which means that we are likely to meet in real life. I should say that I take reality into consideration. If she lives far, though we chat and are friends, I would not pay as much attention to her as to seafarer-partners in this circle, who live in Jiangsu or nearby and are able to attend our gatherings. China is big and there are differences between regions. We live near to each other, and similar to each other, and are under similar living conditions. [Therefore], I feel that we are close and [the group] draws us closer to each other. Moreover, I expect very much that we can meet each other in gatherings and be friends in real life. Though we are sincere to each other online, I hope that we can meet others in real life.

Mermaid had a particularly pragmatic orientation here. Similarly, Crystal-Heart also took this into consideration:

> Q: And after you become familiar with them [other SPs], you will let them know your telephone number?
>
> A: I should say that this applies to those living nearby, for example, Shanghai members. Since we all live in Shanghai, we can make contact with each other. If they live far away, for example in Tianjin or Shenzhen, it is not very necessary.
>
> Q: You mean that this is affected by geographical factors. With those who live nearby and therefore are likely to be met face-to-face, you will communicate more often.
>
> A: Yes.

It seems that some SP participants prioritised friendships that could be moved offline. In contrast to Lash's (2001) argument that cyberspace is a placeless space, this again indicates that offline geographical borders are reproduced in the HCS. In fact, the group friendships mentioned in sub-section 7.2.3 also tended to be geographically bounded. While the members of Yangtze-Girl and Golden-Eye's groups were from Shanghai, the members of Mermaid's group were from Jiangsu. Besides these, the postings in the HCS also suggest that there were several other localised QQ friend groups, such as the Liaoning Chatting Group.

In general, the friendship that has shifted offline seems more intimate than others. Once grounded in offline settings, SPs' online friendship may become stronger. In a sense, offline friendship tends to be more advanced and more developed. For instance, Smiling-Face and Dove who normally met on weekends regarded each other as a *sidang* (inseparable friend), but they did not describe their other online friends as such. One reason for this may be that geographical proximity allows SPS to do more and multiple joint activities which help to develop friendship (Mesch, 2005; Mesch and Talmud, 2006). As a result, this friendship is more likely to grow from simple to complex. The second reason seems to be that it is possible for them to offer each other practical assistance – an additional mode of relating, which is not possible in an online setting. The third reason may be that embodied friendship is more satisfactory than disembodied ones. Embodied friends are accessible in multi-channels and they can accompany each other doing practical things, such as shopping. In contrast, disembodied online friends can only provide each other with mediated company, which is only available when both are online. Thus, though in cyberspace, some SPs still preferred localised friendship which led to place specific and more practical social networks. Calhoun (1998) notes that online networks matter much more when

they supplement instead of replacing localised offline networks. The opposite seems the case in the HCS: when the offline relationship is able to complement the online one, the latter becomes more intimate and complex.

There were, however, some participants unwilling to meet others physically. They did not want to mix the online and the offline together, because they revealed too much of their inner thought and therefore were reluctant to cross the boundary between the anonymous online and the face-to-face offline. Flying-Fish, a 36-year-old seafarer's wife said:

> There is no need to forge and to cheat in this website. At least, I don't do that. This is the reason that I do not want to connect online life and offline life together. It would make me feel unsafe. In real life, no one can speak her/his mind fully.

Willow, who had been posted around one hundred postings within four months since she registered in October of 2005, was another informant reporting to have no online friends at all. The reason was simple – in her words:

> I never mix the virtual and the real.

She was very cautious not to allow 'the virtual' to leak into 'the real'. Online intimate relationships may pose the danger of developing into other settings. To avoid slipping into this danger, Willow had no intention to develop personal relationships in the first place. For her, the generalised relationship was enough.

Both Flying-Fish and Willow's attitude, however, appeared to be wavering. Flying-Fish also stated in the interview:

> When coming to meeting face-to-face, I am very cautious. Maybe I will only meet one or two. For me, the Internet is the Internet and the reality is reality.

Before saying this, she had made an appointment with another SP to go shopping together in the coming weekend:

> A SP said online that she would go where and where next week. I also want to go there and have time. So I tell her that we can go together.

She did go shopping with the other two SP participants during the weekend. In her diary, she wrote:

> Today, Caroline, Crystal-Heart and her friend, and I went shopping together. I have not gone shopping with so many people for a long time. It was such fun and I was so happy!
> [Fieldnote, 23/04/2006]

Willow seemed more resolute. Yet paradoxically, two months after the interview, she posted two pictures of herself online though she deleted them soon afterward, suggesting a change of mind. This may indicate the influence of other participants' behaviour. By August 8th of 2006, there were 105 threads in the forum of the 'Members' Photos'. This indicates that many participants posted their pictures online the HCS. This had an impact on Willow and encouraged her to post her pictures. Similarly, it can be argued that Flying-Fish was also influenced by others' postings regarding offline gathering. The further implication of this is that one participant's feelings and understanding can be (re)shaped by discourses of the website.

7.4 The vulnerability of relationships in the HCS

Relationships in the HCS, especially those sustained only online, can be particularly fragile. Several factors have impacts on such relationships. The first factor is the availability of Internet access. Many SPs are not able to visit the HCS everyday. Mary and Lily, for example, were both students and had two or three QQ friends. They were not able to chat with their QQ friends and visit the HCS often. Yet, whenever they met their friends online they would have a chat, although sometime it was just a short one. Such a chat was often by chance and it could only happen when both parties were online simultaneously.

The second factor is seafarers' presence. SPs' use of the HCS arguably is mainly due to their partners' absence. Once seafarers are home, SPs' participation in both the HCS and online friendships tend to decrease. For example, Rose said:

> Sometimes, we [my online friends and I] do not contact quite often, [because] SPs like us will concentrate on 'eros' at the expense of 'friendships' when our partners come home.

Similarly, Smiling-Face told her friends in a joking tone in her diary two days before her husband came home:

> My dear Dove, River, Katy, Blue, and other sisters, I will be off for a while! From the day after tomorrow on, I will focus on 'eros' and ignore friends. Please do not disturb me. [Fieldnote, 06/09/2006]

Thomas' (2003) research on British seafaring families suggests that seafarers' coming home affected SPs socialising with others. When coming online, it seems also the case. SPs want to spend more time with their partners and to enjoy their time together.

Moreover, when seafarers come back, there may be fewer emotional tensions for SPs and therefore SPs may have less to disclose in the HCS. Rainbow, for instance, said:

> [When he is at the sea], there is waiting and longing, which give rise to some topics and find empathy [in the website]. When he is back, I almost have nothing to say.

The presence of seafarers means that SPs have less time free and also implies that they have less need.

The third factor is time. When one first takes up an activity, he/she may be very keen on it. With time going by, however, one's enthusiasm may decrease. This is also the case for SPs' participation in the HCS. Two informants explained the reasons for their reduced visiting of the HCS as such:

> I came here less frequently recently, because: (1) I am not interested in the Internet as much as before. I am quite busy recently and cannot access the Internet frequently. (2) Because I visited the HCS too often before, I feel that my enthusiasm has somewhat reduced. ....[Rose]

> No one will focus on one thing for a long time, even if it is delicious food or passionate love. People's attention paid to a website is also the case... [Breeze]

From over one and half years' online observation, it was quite clear that except a few SPs, old 'faces' kept fading away and new 'faces' kept appearing.

The fourth factor is the break-up of relationships between SPs and seafarers. Once the relationship is terminated, the former SP exits the SP role and thus her role in the HCS. Several SPs, who could not make the role transfer immediately, wrote about their feelings about the break-up in the HCS. For example, there were two postings in the 'Original Literature' forum, one titled as 'Used to be in love [with a seafarer]', the other 'It is time to say good-bye to yesterday'. Both SPs in these two postings described their bitter feelings of losing their love. Such postings or diary entries, however, tended to serve the purpose of a closure of participation. Many others seemed to leave the HCS quietly without giving an 'exit account' to other participants.

7.5 Social capital in the HCS

Vulnerable as they may be, relationships in the HCS have the potential to be emancipating for SPs especially when they are in need. The HCS enables SPs who are

otherwise separated to 'meet' each other and to develop friendships. The latter provides SPs with good company and a sense of belonging, helps them to tide over difficult times, and even offers them instrumental and practical help. On top of the extensive and general social network discussed in Chapter 6, the HCS empowers SPs to develop friendship networks, which are more satisfactory and rewarding. Moreover, online friendship can be transferred offline, which provides SPs with a practical social network.

The social network constructed in the HCS, data suggests, helped SPs to achieve a positive definition of the self. Yangtze-Girl, for example, compared her feeling before knowing the HCS with that of after and said:

> Before I knew this website, I felt that I did not have any friends with whom I could communicate and who can understand seafarers and their partners. Here, we have similar husbands, similar experiences. We help and support each other. I feel that waiting days are very full....

Thus, waiting days for Yangtze-Girl were no longer teemed with painful loneliness and helpless. The company of similar others and their support made her life colourful. Meanwhile, she was also able to help others. It has been suggested that helping similar others in mutual help groups has therapeutic values (Salem *et al.*, 1997). For SPs, it may also the case. Another informant, Rainbow, also stated:

> I feel fuller and happier, compared with the past. In the past, when he was away, I felt that I was a grousing woman, always thinking about when he was back, when he would ring me, and never happy. The agony of waiting was always with me. But after making many friends in this website, I felt that besides waiting, I should make life full and myself happy.

Rainbow compared her past self – a 'grousing woman' who was 'never happy' and the present self – who felt 'fuller and happier'. Rainbow did not explain what made her feel that she should make life full and herself happy. However, she wrote a lot of postings and diary entries, which revealed her bad feelings and many SPs replied to her with comforting words and suggestions. Perhaps it was the latter that changed her attitude to the waiting days. Both Yangtze-Girl and Rainbow's comments reveal that relationships/friendships online empowered them to feel more positive and confident.

Participation in the HCS, then, serves to benefit SPs' well-being. This appears to support the theory of social capital and many associated empirical research findings. Social capital, according to Putnam and Goss (2002: 8), can be defined as 'social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity'. As we have seen, the HCS provides SPs with an online social network, in which SPs reciprocate each other with support, encouragement, information and good company. Thus, participation in the HCS is likely to produce and acquire social capital. By definition, the latter is a valuable resource, since it is a form of capital. A large number of empirical research has demonstrated positive associations between social capital and individuals' physical and mental health (e.g. De Silva *et al.*, 2005; De Silva and Harpham, 2007; Pollack and von dem Kneseback, 2004; Young *et al.*, 2004; Folland, 2007). For example, Folland's (2007) quantitative study examines the association between population health and social capital in 48 contiguous states in the USA over 1975-1998. The study shows that the positive association between the two items is quite strong. In another quantitative study which investigated the association between maternal social capital and child nutritional status in four developing countries (Ethiopia, Peru, Vietnam and one Indian state), De Silva and Harpham's (2007) data also showed a fairly consistent positive result. Though qualitative in nature, the current study to a certain extent confirms that online social capital is also positively associated with the participants' well-being and that it is able to transform 'grousing women' into 'fuller and happier' ones.

Chapter 8   Making 'Qualified' Seafarer-Partners

To answer the question: what have you got from participating in the *Home of Chinese Seafarer* (HCS), Mermaid suggested:

> [It] makes me feel that I can be a qualified seafarer's wife.

Becoming 'a qualified seafarer's wife', then, seems to be a major outcome of participation in the website. This quotation also indicates that there were a set of norms and values present which defined what constituted a 'good' seafarer-partner (SP). Drawing upon online observation and interview data, this chapter aims to unpack these norms and values and show how they were produced and reproduced. Besides that, this chapter also discusses whether making 'qualified' SPs is liberating or repressive. The first section examines the content and the construction process of these beliefs. Analysis indicates that participating in the HCS is a learning process, through which SPs learn the qualities of being good SPs and educate each other to become 'qualified' SPs. This process is further reinforced, as will be discussed in section two, by the phenomenon that participation also strengthens SPs' affective bonds to their beloved seafarers. The last section will revisit the empowerment thesis and answer the question: in what sense is participation in the HCS emancipating and to what extent is participation in the HCS an emancipatory activity?

8.1 Learning to be 'a qualified seafarer's wife'

Participation implies a teaching and learning process. By replying to postings, as shown in sub-section 6.2.3, SPs taught each other to see things from different perspectives and to take appropriate actions. By reading postings, SPs not only acquired all sorts of support mentioned in Chapter 6, but also learnt to take on board and consider others' attitudes. In this process, they constructed an image of 'qualified' SPs. This section details the qualities of such SPs and the process of identity formation.

8.1.1 Learning to be understanding

The first quality of a good SP seems to be understanding: understanding the nature and implications of the seafaring job. As indicated in section 5.1 and sub-section 6.1.1, seafaring is a 'secluded' career and SPs may have very limited knowledge of it before

participating in the HCS. As a result, many SPs reported that participation in the HCS helped them to gain a better understanding of seafarers.

This better understanding appears to be achieved through a joint construction of the seafarer as an idealised type. In sub-section 6.1.1, we mentioned that some seafarer participants wrote about their lives at sea and some SPs wrote about their experiences of relating with seafarers and visiting ships. These writings produced a narrative of seafarers' life at sea. Prior (2003) argues that discourse serves to create and stabilise identities. In a similar vein, the narrative about seafarers contributes to creating a heroic image of working seafarers for SPs. From those postings, the 'reading SPs' came to know aspects of seafaring life that would otherwise remain closed to them. At the same time, they discovered facts and details about the 'new seafarers' in the sense that the latter gained a new identity from the HCS. Partners came to appreciate the nature of their seafarers' daily work:

> In the past before I came to this website, I did not know how hard and tiresome his work is. When he got along berths, I felt that he should answer my call immediately. Otherwise, I would be very angry. Now I know that their job is hard and busy. [Yangtze-Girl]

> From others' postings, I can loosely feel that his work must be hard. [Mermaid]

Furthermore, SPs believed that in order not to make them unduly worried, seafarers would not let them know the difficulties involved in working at sea. Mermaid, for example, stated:

> He [her boyfriend] does tell me something [about his work]. But he has never told me how harsh his work is, since he is afraid that I may worry about that. [When coming to that], he equivocates.

Similar perceptions were evident in some SPs postings. When one SP wrote a posting complaining that her boyfriend only wrote her a short message (which only briefly mentioned that he was ok) after two months' waiting, another SP replied to her:

> Most seafarers are not good at expressing their emotions. That he said he was ok is to set your heart at ease...If he told you all the difficulties and pains on the ship, you would worry to death...The same thing happened to me once and I wondered whether my husband still loved me. Until he came back and I found the scars on his body, did I realise what his word 'ok' contained... [Fieldnote, 20/06/2006]

As a result, a *hard-working-but-never-complaining-for-the-well-being-of-SPs* image of seafarers was constructed and almost became the underpinning assumption of SPs in the HCS.

The above SP's reply also indicates that like sociologists, SPs found a 'gender asymmetry' in affective expression (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; 1995a; 1995b) – 'most seafarers are not good at expressing their emotions'. Unlike sociologists, however, they had no intention to challenge this. Rather, they took it for granted and employed it to justify seafarers' inability to meet SP's expectations. We have seen from sub-section 6.2.3 that two repliers used 'all men are careless' (reply C4) and 'all man are like that' (reply C5) to naturalise and explain away one seafarer's failure to reciprocate his partner's messages. Thus, SPs understand that if their partners do not ring them or if they do not reply to their messages, it is either because seafarers are busy or they are *naturally* not good at doing intimacy.

In the process discussed above, SPs learnt that their beloved seafarers are hard working and caring about their well-being though not good at talking about feelings. This understanding, with little doubt, idealises and glorifies seafarers somewhat. It also gave rise to the second quality of 'a qualified seafarer's wife': being supportive.

8.1.2 Supportive and less demanding

According to G.H. Mead (1972)[31], one achieves a sense of self when he/she is able to take others' attitude to look back at him/her-self and to treat it as an object; and the self thus consists of two parts – the objective and social 'Me' which is internalised others' opinions of the self, and the subjective 'I' which takes and responds to others' attitudes. The 'I' and the 'Me' are in a constant dialogue: the former keeps taking in new opinions of others, which enrich the latter; the enriched 'Me' in turn requires new

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[31] Although formulated nine decades ago, Mead's view that self is a reflexive social process has been widely acknowledged and is still influential today (Callero, 2003). Foucault's work (1990; 1991) shows that individual subjectivity is a product of the discursive regime and social control. Following Foucault, Hall (1996) argues that self is constructed within discourse. However, Craib (1998) criticises Hall for reducing the self to the 'Me' part and thus ignoring the 'I' component. It is generally held, following Mead, that the self is both a social product (the social 'Me') and a social force (the subjective 'I') (Callero, 2003).

responses from the 'I'. In this process, the self is reformed and transformed continuously.

Similarly, the constructed and newly learned seafarers' image provided SPs with a different perspective with which to view themselves. They (the 'I'), as it were, put themselves into the shoes of seafarers and the informed others to judge their former selves (the 'Me'). In this process, many SPs came to realise that they had asked too much and misunderstood their partners before. From Yangtze-Girl's words in sub-section 8.1.1, we can see that she felt that her former anger at her partner's not answering her phone-calls in time was inappropriate. The experiences on the HCS also helped Mermaid to understand that seafarers were 'sacrificing their youth and life in exchange for improving the life quality of their family members'. This in turn caused her to review herself in a different light:

> In the past, I had a misunderstanding. I felt at that time that working onboard was good. He only needed to work 8 hours per day. Besides that, life was sleeping, eating and reading. I felt that this kind of life was better than my life. I had to get up in the morning and walk for a distance to start my work, and then had to cook on my own. I had to take more troubles. In contrast, they did not need to but enjoyed a higher salary. Later and gradually, I understood that life at sea is harsh. They sacrificed their youth and life in exchange for improving the life quality of their family members.

Once SPs found out that their perception of seafarers had been wrong, they responded by changing and reforming their former attitudes. When SPs realised that they used to be unreasonable and demanding, they tried hard to lower their expectations. Yangtze-Girl, who used to be angry at her boyfriend's failure in ringing her, claimed to become 'more at peace':

> It [participation in this website] makes my mind more at peace. Having read others' experiences, I feel that life should be like this.

For Yangtze-Girl, then, a SP should have peace of mind, and not be angry at the seafarer's failure of communication, since this was because of the nature of the seafaring job. Her former expectation – phone-calls from her boyfriend immediately after he got alongside a berth – was invalidated. Similarly, when Mermaid noticed that her boyfriend sacrificed a lot and felt that she misunderstood him before, she

decided to be 'kinder' to him than she used to be, and became more determined to support him:

> This knowledge and feeling touched and changed me. When he was on leave, I felt that I was kinder to him than before. ... I feel that from now on I will ... if he chooses to carry on with this, I will back him; if he is tired of this and shifts ashore, I do not mind the possible low salary and will keep supporting him.

Mermaid' words also reveal a sense of respect – respect for seafaring careers and their partners' choice. This respect was clearly shown in the HCS. For example, one SP wrote a posting titled: *My Seafarer Husband, When I Am Able to Deal with Everything Independently, What need have I for you?*:

> When I am able to overcome all difficulties in life, when I am able to endure loneliness, when I am able to bear the sexless marriage, and when I am able not to depend on a man, my husband, what are you there for? [Fieldnote, 13/01/2007]

This posting was interpreted as disrespectful and insulting to seafarers and made other SPs feel unpleasant. As a result, it attracted others' angry replies[32]:

- I dislike reading such a posting. If you think that your seafarer husband is useless, why did you marry him in the first place? If you do not respect your husband's job and sacrifice, do not choose him as your husband. Personally, I think that you are not worthy of being a seafarer's wife.

- Actually, all seafarers' wives are very independent. When you sacrifice, you husband is also sacrificing. If you sacrifice for your own family and love, there is no need to complain.

- Does not he go to the sea for the sake of your family and your better living standard in the future? [Fieldnote, 13/01/2007]

On the one hand, such replies reveal the strong belief that seafarers are sacrificing for their partners and families and therefore should be respected – 'if you do not respect your husband's job and sacrifice ... you are not worthy of being a seafarer's wife'. On the other, the scolding and critical tones provide a visible sanction to those who do not comply with the group values. In a sense, the sanction serves to enforce the norm that SPs should support and respect seafarers' careers and choices and be less demanding.

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[32] This topic ran into a long discussion thread consisting of 73 postings. Here, I only choose three replies to illustrate the point from the first ten.

8.1.3 Learning to cope with being alone

'Being understanding' and 'being supportive' led to the third quality of 'a qualified seafarer's wife': someone who is able to cope with being alone. In SPs' perception, if they understood and supported their partners, they should not add any extra burden to their beloved, since it was hard enough to work at sea; rather they should protect seafarers from being concerned with what was happening back home and provide a warm and worry-free harbour. Thus, we saw in section 5.1 that SPs struggled not to reveal negative news or events to seafarers in case they would become over-concerned with these and thus more vulnerable to accidents or incidents. In a sense, SPs tried to reassure their beloved that they were competent in taking care of themselves and/or their families alone.

Being able to cope successfully also meant waiting faithfully. There was a thread titled: *What do our seafarer boyfriends/husbands need?* The initiating SP made the opening posting:

> Our seafarer boyfriends/husbands need our emotional support. Besides this, what else do they need? [Fieldnote, 10/01/2006]

The replies were revolving around understanding, support, love, and a warm family. One wrote:

> [What they need is] similar to what others do, plus faithful waiting.

The ability to wait patiently and faithfully therefore was particularly important. Certainly, long-term waiting is not pleasant and it involves agonising loneliness. As we noted in section 5.1, SPs complained about this. However, SPs also encouraged each other to be strong, to think about the good part of it, and to envisage the happy future, and they offered each other advice to overcome difficulties. For example, when one SP complained about loneliness, another two replied:

- Maybe this is a kind of happiness. Separation will bring you more happiness [when you reunite together]. Perhaps, only SPs can possess this kind of feeling.
- Keep yourself busy, and you will forget your bad feeling and longing for him. [Fieldnote, 10/03/2007]

As a result, SPs were teaching and learning from each other about how to cope with problems associated with being alone. In other words, SPs were instructing and

helping each other to wait faithfully, socialising each other into appropriate expectations and perspectives.

In section 5.2, we saw that SPs were likely to face the perception of seafarers' infidelity. The online fieldwork noted that this issue was a recurrent discussion theme in the website. One reaction to such a topic was to steer clear of and avoid it, which was echoed by Lovely-Dolphin:

> I think that it is better not to discuss negative topics, such as red-light areas. This may be regarded as self-deception, but I think it is better not to discuss these. I think that people tend to generalise a special case to all other ones. Even though there is mutual-trust, it is inevitable to get affected psychologically. For the sake of most seafarers' families and marriage, it is better to discuss less the dark side.

As a result, several SPs wrote in their replies to such threads: this topic has been discussed many times; there is no need and it is meaningless to discuss it over and over again. Yet, SPs were obviously aware that some seafarers were not faithful. To dismiss this topic as worthy of discussion or as something specific to seafarers was the most common stance, which was clear in Golden-Eye's statement:

> Recently, there was a posting about seafarers' infidelity. I felt angry. Infidelity is not a unique phenomenon of seafarers. It is an issue of the whole society. I think that seafarers should not be equalled with infidelity. This hurts our seafarer-partners' hearts.

In her view, infidelity was not a problem particularly concerning seafarers for it happened to people from all walks of life. Since this was the case, according to this opinion, SPs should not be stigmatised for it and there was no need to be preoccupied with it. Another strategy for dealing with this question was also common: to believe that only a minority and degraded seafarers went to red-light zones and that their particular beloved ones would not do that because they loved each other. For example, in replying to such a thread, one SP wrote:

> My husband once told me that several of his colleagues were caught by police when they were doing business with prostitutes[33].... [But] only a minority of seafarers are like that! I trust my husband and am not worried. [Fieldnote, 19/08/2007]

In this way, SPs' knowledge that seafarers can be promiscuous and the confidence that their specific beloved ones are faithful to them were 'naturally' and yet

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[33] Prostitution is illegal in China.

paradoxically united. Employing these strategies, SPs persuaded each other either to 'bracket off' or dismiss the issue in order to be able to wait for their husbands/boyfriends faithfully and with trust.

In the HCS, SPs also learnt to foresee possible problems in the future and to adjust themselves in advance. As we have seen, some SPs revealed problems and frustrations that they were facing, while others suggested strategies to address these issues, in the HCS. The disclosure of problems and suggestions were helpful not only for those who were experiencing the difficulties, but also for those who had not. One the one hand, such postings served as a warning that SPs were likely to go through these situations. In a sense, they raised awareness in those inexperienced SPs. On the other hand, the coping advice helped to prepare and equip inexperienced SPs to overcome similar problems in the future. Ayaya, a newly married SP, for example, reported:

> I came to know all sorts of frustrations in seafaring families, through which I can predict some difficulties lying ahead that I have to face alone and adjust my mood in advance.

Coping alone means self-sacrificing on the part of SPs. In order to protect their partners' well-being, SPs try to shoulder the burden of problems at home alone rather than share them with their partners. By choosing to wait, SPs close off other opportunities which may lead to a more rewarding relationship, and are willing to prepare themselves for and go through foreseeable difficulties.

8.1.4 The generalised other as a reference group

'The generalised other' certainly is important in the constitution of the self, since the 'Me' is the internalised attitudes of others. From the above discussion, it is clear that SPs were influencing and influenced by each other through reading and/or writing in the HCS. They were guiding, learning from, and making reference to, each other. In this process, SPs constructed the above mentioned norms and values, against which they evaluated and reformed/transformed themselves.

In a sense, the generalised other in the HCS forms an important reference group for SPs. The term 'reference group' refers to 'any group to which a person related his[/her] attitude' (Kelley, 1968: 77). Reference groups have a normative and a

comparative function (Kelley, 1968; Merton and Rossi, 1968). The former serves to internalise the group norms, values and attitudes in those individuals who make reference to this group, while the latter provides those individuals standards against which they can evaluate and appraise themselves (Kelley, 1968). More recently, Holdsworth and Morgan (2007) revisited the concept of the generalised other and similarly argued that generalised others serve as a reference point against which one makes self-evaluation.

The effectiveness of the group function is reinforced by two factors. Firstly, having the similar identity and experience, SPs are able to empathise with each other easily. They positively relate to and identify with each other with little difficulty. This helps to produce a strong sense of being in the group and thus group solidarity. The latter arguably serves to fortify, and also motivates SPs to comply with and appraise themselves against, the normative image – 'a qualified seafarer's wife'. Secondly, the empathy and common problems SPs experience motivate them to support each other in the way discussed in the last two chapters. Indeed, Shott (1979) points out that empathy makes people more altruistic in providing help to others. There was a general belief that the HCS was a 'warm home', where SPs should provide assistance to each other, as one of them explained:

> The HCS is our warm home. Here we should comfort each other, encourage each other, and support each other. [Fieldnote, 05/09/2006]

The word 'should' suggested that providing mutual support and encouragement was regarded as a norm in the website. On the one hand, this norm helps to bind SPs together more tightly, since they can feel safe here. On the other, this norm is in effect to nurture the seafarer-SP relationship, as we saw in sub-section 6.2.3. The nurturing thus contributes to the promotion of understanding, supporting and sacrificing SPs.

Thus, the feature of this group helps SPs to adopt the attitude and values of the generalised other. The latter, however, as Holdsworth and Morgan (2007) point out, is not homogenous: while in some cases, the generalised other is anonymous and unidentified, in other cases, it refers to specific and named individuals. In the current research, it appears that several SPs were regarded as role models in the HCS and that they played a more significant role in promoting the image of a 'qualified' SP.

8.1.5 Learning from role models

In the constitution of the self, the others do not have an equal status and some are more significant than the rest. This is also the case in the HCS. Those whose postings were emotionally moving, those that could be identified with more readily, and those who had similar values appeared to have more weight than those more 'average' or mere ordinary ones. Red-Apple, for example, was mentioned frequently by several informants. One informant suggested that I would find it very interesting to interview her. What made her famous amongst HCS was her rather engaging autobiographic thread. In this thread, she wrote of the eighteen years' experiences and stories of being a SP. She mentioned problems and frustrations associated with SPs' life. More importantly, however, she recounted her optimistic attitude of being a SP, the associated positive outcomes, and the happy marriage and family life. Many SP readers were moved and replied to this thread. By September 2006, it became a thread of 454 postings, the longest one to date. This thread was also defined by the moderators as a top-up one, which means that it could stay in a top position permanently. Red-Apple thus became kind of a heroine of this website. Many SPs saw her as a good example and a role model they aspired to be. For example, Mermaid stated:

> There are many touching postings written by seafarer-partners, for example, Red-Apple's. I copied all her postings and reread them when I have time. I make her my example.

By telling their stories, those role model SPs depict a positive picture of seafaring families. This picture shows to others that happy and rewarding relationships and family lives are lying ahead if SPs are able to endure the long waiting and support their partners whole-heartedly. In a sense, it offers a promise and a hope, which motivates SPs to strive for this happy future and to achieve what the role models have attained. In other words, it makes SPs identify themselves with their role models and learn to become a model seafarer's wife. To achieve this aspiration, SPs happily subscribe to the group beliefs and become more determined to sacrifice themselves in order to support their partners.

Therefore, the HCS can be seen as a site of secondary socialisation, where SP participants are learning to be 'a qualified seafarer's wife', that is, to understand

seafarers and seafaring careers in a particular way, to give their partners full support and respect, to sacrifice, and to endure and overcome the problems associated with being a SP. In the course of the construction, some 'model' SPs play an important role. They offer not only their experiences and positive attitudes, but also a picture of a happy seafaring family and future, which inspires others to learn from role models – to become a good and 'qualified' SP. From a perspective of constructivism (Berger and Luckmann, 1971; Gergen, 1994; 1999), it can be said that through participation in the site, seafarer-partners produced and reproduce a group sanctioned reality and the associated norms.

8.2 Consolidating the attachment bond

What makes possible and sustains the group norms discussed in the last section, with little doubt, is the attachment bond, in other words, the love between SPs and seafarers. If the latter is weakened, the binding power of the beliefs, arguably, will be correspondingly reduced. Alternatively, if the love is strengthened, SPs will be more likely to subscribe to the group values. In this section, I will discuss how participating in the website works on this bond. First, we will see that participation makes SPs feel that they are emotionally close to their absent beloved.

8.2.1 Emotional intimacy

Contemporary partnerships tend to focus on intimacy (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1990; 1991; for a detailed discussion see Subsection 2.2.3 and 2.2.4). Intimacy presumes closeness, both emotional and physical. A relationship can be interpreted as intimate only when there is emotional resonance and attraction between two involved individuals. Emotional resonance generates mutual affection, the exchange and reciprocation of which in its turn provides emotional satisfaction for both parties. Mutual attraction in effect gives rise to an 'attachment bond' (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980). When the 'bond' is stretched across time and space, as it were, a tension will be created in it to drag both ends together and ease itself. Without emotional satisfaction and tension, a relationship may be superficial or instrumental, rather than intimate. Emotional closeness, however, in most cases needs the supplement of physical closeness. Although modern technology has made possible instant communication across the globe, linguistic interaction is just one channel for intimate and emotional exchange. Long-distance and mediated communication may

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be able to sustain friendships. Sexual relationships, however, require frequent bodily contact and physical presence of involved parties. In a study of long distance relationships, Holmes (2004) found that a hug was more satisfactory than a talk for geographically separated couples. Bodily contact, then, is an effective means of affective reciprocation and doing intimacy.

For seafaring couples, however, intermittent separation makes physical intimacy problematic. The physical absence of seafarers for a long period deprives the couples of frequent bodily contact. Even mediated presence through technology aided communication is out of the question when seafarers are at sea and no communication signal or an effective communication instrument is available. Longing for emotional and sexual intimacy, which manifests itself as emotional loneliness, are more likely to haunt seafaring couples than it is to those who can meet each other quite often.

Participating in the HCS makes SPs feel that their partners are emotionally nearer, though in an imagined way. In sub-section 6.2.4, we noted that writing expressive postings is a way of doing imagined intimacy. Reading in the HCS may serve a similar function. We are all aware that between loving couples, photos, gifts, or other particular objects can be infused with a special symbolic meaning. These symbolic objects, in a sense, embody the virtual presence of the beloved other. (Many people would say to their beloved one, 'when I see this, I feel like seeing you.' Or 'when you see this, you will remember me.') Of course, the symbolic meaning is derived from love, and it must have a significance that is underpinned by love, which generates an 'attachment bond' between two individuals in love (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Shaver and Hazan, 1988; 1999). In the long term physical absence of the other, the emotion of love may drive one to imagine the affective or spiritual closeness of the beloved with the aid of the symbolic objects. We have seen in chapter 6 that there were various kinds of writings about seafaring in the HCS: some SPs disclosed emotions and feelings associated with their relationships with seafarers; some SPs described about their experience of ship visits and their love stories; some seafarers wrote about their lives at sea and other kinds of factual information about seafaring in the HCS. Such writings made the HCS a symbolic artefact that functioned similar to that of objects we have just mentioned. It helped SPs to imagine, feel, and recall the closeness with their beloved. Two SPs wrote:

Thanks to the HCS. When I cannot help [but longing for him], it helps me find people in the same situation; it helps me find consolation; and it helps me find the illusion that he is with me ... [Fieldnote, 26/11/05]

Without your message, I feel spiritless and restless. Everyday I depend on the HCS to soak up bits and bits of information about you, which helps me imagine [your life] and evoke memories. [Fieldnote, 15/04/2006]

The first quotation also indicates the importance of the social network formed in the HCS for SPs when seafarers are absent. The main point here, however, is that the HCS to a certain extent put SPs in close touch with their partners emotionally. Another SP wrote:

In every waiting day and in every longing day, the HCS is my only spiritual home. ... Reading the postings makes me feel that he is very close. [Fieldnote, 01/05/2006]

The HCS, then, acts as a proxy for real contact with partners. The emotional closeness in turn helps to keep the love alive. The discrepancy between the emotional nearness and physical distance certainly makes the love bitter and painful. Yet, it gives SPs enough space to imagine and idealise the absent partners. The HCS in its part offers materials – postings about seafarers – as the aid for the idealisation, as we saw in sub-section 8.1.1, SPs constructed a heroic image of seafarers based on what they read from the website.

In the process of idealisation, the love seems to be re-energised or re-stimulated in SPs. One SP participant wrote:

My husband should thank the HCS. It is a vent for my emotions and a sanctuary for my love as well. Without it, my love to him would have been unstable and weakened [with time going by]. Every logging onto the HCS is a process of reinforcing my longing for him [her partner] and a process of melting my resentment towards him. [02/02/2006].

It appears that the HCS was like a powerhouse, able to recharge this SP with love – every time she logged in, her feeling for her partner would be reinvigorated and reinforced. Similarly, Blue-Elf, a 27-year-old seafarer's girlfriend, stated:

When I feel wavering [about the relationship], I come to read them [postings]. This has a relatively huge impact on me and makes me feel that waiting is worthwhile.

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For Blue-Elf, participation clearly strengthened the emotional bond with her boyfriend. Where does the power or force come from? One explanation lies at the fact that as a symbolic object the HCS helps SPs to refresh the memory of their beloved. The refreshed memory in turn revitalises the attachment bond. However, it is reasonable to assume that SPs have other things, such as photos and gifts from their beloved, to help them imagine their partners' presence and closeness. Though left with these objects, Blue-Elf still seemed to have hesitated. It was this hesitation that made her turn to the HCS for strength to hold on. This explanation, then, is limited; and on top of this, there must be another and more important source for the force.

8.2.2 Collective effervescence in the HCS

To make sense where and how the power is derived, it is necessary to turn to Durkheim's (1976) idea of 'collective effervescence'. The latter 'arises when people are assembled together in the presence of what they hold to be sacred' (Shilling, 1997: 209). Durkheim (1976: 215) described religious gatherings of aboriginal Australian tribes as such:

> The very fact of concentration acts as an exceptionally powerful stimulant. When they are once come together, a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation. Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others, and is re-echoed by the others. The initial impulse thus proceeds, growing as it goes, as an avalanche grows in its advance.

Thus, when people gather together and express the same sentiment, the latter gains an extraordinary force from the collectivity and a collective effervescence can be produced. In this process, individual consciousnesses come into contact and are merged into a collective consciousness. The latter, for Durkheim, is equal to a social will which is superior to and much powerful than the individual ones, and which, as it were, enters, infuses energy into, and exerts control over individuals. Therefore, in a situation where effervescence is aroused, we feel moved by the common sentiment or belief; and

> [w]e feel that we are being led, directed, and carried along by singular energies that, manifestly, do not come from us but are imposed on us from the outside (Durkheim, 1960: 335)

This is not to say that the energy is transferred from outside. Rather, it is stimulated from within by the joint sentiment or social will. The latter, in a sense, boosts individuals' vitality by stirring up their latent energy. Therefore, according to Durkheim, the extraordinary power that one feels during effervescence is from the collectivity or society.

The concept of effervescence provides a powerful tool in studying collective behaviour. Burkitt (2005) and Tiryakian (1995) applied it to study public demonstration and social movements. Hartley (2004) and Lincoln and Guillot (2006) note in some work places that collective rituals and ceremonies are performed to build organisational cohesion and to produce emotional energy in order to boost productivity. Furthermore, collective passions also help to explain collective aggression, such as genocide (Stone, 2004) and ethnic conflicts and violence (Verkaaik, 2003).

Similarly following Durkheim's insight, we can say that the source for the reinvigorating power SPs felt in the HCS is their (mediated) co-presence and their individual yet common sentiment – their love for seafarers. Certainly, SP participants do not physically gather together. Yet, when they imagine and feel the emotional closeness in the aid of the HCS, they read others' writings and accounts which are likely to reveal a similar affection. In a sense, others are present and express the group sentiment in their postings. In other words, writings in the HCS can be regarded as a disembodied gathering of SPs communicating the group belief. When a SP reads the postings, she is likely to sense that others are conveying an emotion similar to hers. Her own affection, then, as it were, vibrates back and forth with that of others. The individual sentiments, then, become synchronised, reach resonance, and fuse into a joint one. A collective effervescence is thus produced, which, metaphorically, fills the SP with the sentiment and takes control of her. Being carried away by the affective energy, the SP may feel and follow nothing else but her own sentiment – love – in its group-multiplied form. In this process, love is enlarged and become clearer and deeper, as we can see from the two quotes at the end of the last section. Another SP even seemed addicted to this kind of emotional charge and wrote:

> Browsing the HCS has become my daily routine and I nearly cannot do without it. Having read those postings about seafarers' lives, work, and love ... I feel that my love to him

becomes deeper. I want to tell him that my love for him will stand firmly. [Fieldnote, 07/01/2006].

Thus, the reinforcement of love in the HCS is not single-handedly done by one individual in imagination and in the absence of the beloved. Instead, it depends on a collective mobilisation of the affection in the mediated presence of other SP participants. Unlike other symbolic object such as photos and gifts, the HCS is a group instead of an individual one.

The energy provoked in effervescence produces a feeling of joy, for example, the 'extraordinary degree of exaltation' felt by Australian aboriginals, and other forms of religious ecstasy. This also seems the case in the HCS. Perhaps this is why the above SP became addicted to it. Maybe this is a reason why SPs felt excited when their threads received replies, as discussed in sub-section 6.3.2, since each reply could be interpreted as a confirmation, each confirmation strengthens the initiator's feeling, and the strengthened feeling in turn excites her and stirs up energy.

The energy is also diverted to reinforce group solidarity and thus norms. It makes them more aware that they belong to the same group and have a moral duty towards each other. This, arguably, contributes to SPs' belief that they should encourage and support each other. The solidarity and belief, presumably, makes SPs more likely to reply to others in an emotional way as described in sub-section 6.2.3. The energy is also directed to write expressive verses, poems and stories as shown in sub-section 6.2.4. In this sense, SPs' participation and the effervescence mutually reinforce and feed each other: effervescence may inspire SPs to write, the writings serve to nurture the seafarer-SP relationship and produce norms, and the latter makes SPs more convinced of their love and thus more prone to empathising with others to produce effervescence. This is not to say that SPs are like puppets directed and controlled by their own sentiment and a group-will moving along a circle without any sense of agency, but I shall return to this issue in the next sub-section.

More significantly, effervescence can be a powerful weapon, which inspires in its group members a kind of sentimental energy, and then mobilises them to fight against the common enemy. Durkheim (1976) observed many occasions in which 'collective

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effervescence' charged group members with extraordinary strength, courage and confidence to fight religious wars and to launch social revolutions.

Furthermore, according to Durkheim, while the group solidarity/effervescence filled group members with courage to fight the outsiders, the violence towards the enemy in turn contributed to enhancing the group solidarity. Similarly, Bauman (1990) argues that friends and enemies are mutually reinforcing. In his view, the existence of enemies strengthens the solidarity of the friends; and the moral duty towards friends makes people combat their common enemies more fiercely. Mead (1972: 220) also points out insightfully that 'there is no situation in which the self can express itself so easily as it can over against the common enemy of the groups to which it is united.' Thus, the fighting against enemies consolidates the moral duty; and the latter in its turn mobilises the group members to align with group aims.

The force of the 'collective effervescence' in the HCS also appeared to imbue SPs with power to face and with the ability to deal with their daily challenges. What particular challenges do SPs face? There are, of course, many, as we mentioned in Chapter 5, such as loneliness, painful waiting, stigmatisation from others, and objection from family members and friends. The effervescence stimulated in the HCS charges SPs with confidence and strength to resist and defend their relationships against these challenges or negativities. The friendship and moral support provided by others made the effort more effective, as two SPs wrote:

> Actually, many times, I feel resentful to be alone. When others know that my boyfriend is a seafarer, they would ask: 'You are such a good girl. Why do you enter a relationship with a seafarer?' ... Fortunately, I am able to find some confidence and strength [to overcome this] here [in the HCS]. [Fieldnote, 24/07/2006]

> Having read many love stories between seafarers and SP, I feel more confident [about my relationship with my seafarer boyfriend]. [Fieldnote, 08/12/2006]

When they gained strength and became more convinced of their choice, SPs were more likely to encourage others to be strong and thus further reinforce group norms. Mermaid, for example, acquired confidence from participating in the HCS and became determined to overcome her parents' objection:

> In 2004 when we started our relationship, I did not know much of his job and my parents were against it. At that time, I felt wavering. Although we started the relationship after three years' friendship, I did not stand firm because of my limited understanding of his job and my parents' objection. In this website, however, I read many seafarer-partners' firm beliefs. This, I felt, may have changed me. In March of 2005, my mother was strongly against it. She threatened to break our mother-daughter relationship if we continued. Influenced by other seafarer-partners' firmness, I felt that I was very persistent with the relationship, and I felt that I should never give up. Therefore, I think that this website consolidated our relationship. It has given me a better understanding of him and in turn I have given him more support.

Having experienced this change, Mermaid believed that like her other SPs needed to understand and support their beloved. As a result, she recommended the website to other SPs in the hope that they would become supportive as well:

> Interviewer: In which respect(s) do you think this website is beneficial for you?
>
> Mermaid: It lets me have a deep understanding of him, his life and his job. So I recommended it to a friend of my boyfriend. He just got a girlfriend. ... I told him if she had access to the Internet, let her visit the HCS. This would familiarise her with the lives of seafarers and SPs.
>
> Interviewer: You mean that provided that you have opportunities, you would recommend this website to other SPs?
>
> Mermaid: Yes. I would never let go any opportunities. As long as I know them, I hope that they visit this website, be it for reading or replying to or initiate postings. I hope that they can have a better understanding of the seafaring job.

It appears that once SPs gain confidence to overcome problems, they hope and 'urge' others to do the same. This consolidates group norms again, for this encouragement is likely to turn to nurturing postings. Mermaid reported:

> The biggest help this website gives to me is that it consolidates our love and relationship.

Therefore, she hoped that the same would happen to other SPs as well.

8.2.3 Emotion, the self, and society

It seems that we have attributed too much to effervescence to the extent that we are in effect claiming 'the death of the author' – if SPs' participation was driven by the sentiment which was derived from their own affective belief but was multiplied in the

group, was it not the sentiment that spoke itself through SPs' mouths? Where was the reflexivity and thus the agency involved in Mead's social process of the self?

However, it seems plausible to reinterpret Durkheim's idea of effervescence in the light of the emotion management theory (Hochschild, 1979; 1983) which is discussed in sub-section 6.2.1. According to this theory, social actors need to work on their feelings – either to evoke desired but absent ones or to repress inappropriate but existing ones – in order to comply with social norms. By focusing on rationally shaping and managing feelings or in fact mis-feelings, the emotion management theory does not look into occasions when individuals' sentiment is well-suited in the situation. The concept of effervescence clearly explores one such occasion. The insight of the management perspective, however, can help us to understand effervescence in the following way. In a gathering, social actors understand the situation in such a way that it allows them to express, instead of repressing, the sentiment. As a result, they feel safe to let go the feeling. In the beginning, however, individuals are likely to rationally manage their expressive actions for fear that they may make mistakes. In other words, they control and guard themselves against over-reaction on the sentiment. When the actors notice each other's sentimental behaviours, they know that their feeling and actions are validated and confirmed. The confirmation, on the one hand, reinforces one's feeling, on the other, makes the individual feel safe and legitimate to drop more of his/her self-constraints and to express the sentiment more freely. In a sense, individuals gradually loosen the rational control of themselves. Others' confirmation and the ability to vent the sentiment with little social restrictions may also give individuals a sense of excitement, which stirs up sentimental energy. This energy in turn is directed into emotional actions. Gradually, individuals may lose sight of other things but focus their attention and boosted energy mainly on their own 'extraordinary' emotional experience and others' sentimental confirmations; and the effervescence reaches its climax. In this process, it seems that social actors do not lose themselves completely, since they keep interpreting the situation and others' behaviours. However, on such an occasion, individuals' reflexivity inevitably becomes selective and confined by the emotion, as they have little attention and energy left for things that would reduce the intensity of the sentiment.

From the above analysis, we can also see that the theory of emotion management and Durkheim's idea complement with each other: while the former explains social actors' intentional shaping feelings in order to make them appropriate, the latter in a sense focuses on social actors' confirming the legitimacy of each other' sentiments. There are, then, at least two types of emotional interactions: managing (mis)feelings and confirming and boosting the common sentiment. In a similar way, the concept of collective effervescence also complements Goffman's (1969; 1972) idea that individuals have to manage a personal front in public – the former shows that publicly individuals can encourage each other to let go of their self-control in certain situations. Emotion and self management, as we saw in sub-section 6.2.1, results in social order and cohesion. Effervescence, as shown in the last sub-section, also reinforces group solidarity, though in a different way. Besides that, it may serve to protect the group from invaders and motivate the group to invade others. Furthermore, effervescence, a public protest for example, can also lead to social upheaval and social change. In this sense, it can sometimes become a powerful collective agency.

Let us return to SPs. Both forms of emotional interactions are working in the HCS. On the one hand, as we noted in sub-section 6.2.3, SPs try to help each other suppress bad feelings – such as frustrations and doubts. On the other, love poems, verses, and stories described in sub-section 6.2.4 and the confirmatory replies to a certain extent produce effervescence which encourages SPs to forget their mundane problems and to focus on the feeling of love for a while. Both serve to reinforce group norms. This is not, however, to claim that SPs will experience effervescence every time they log into the HCS. Nor is it to argue that every SP will experience it. In fact, many writings in the HCS seemed to be banal and trivial and could hardly be conducive to effervescence. Moreover, as mentioned in section 7.4, some SPs were initially very enthusiastic about participating; with time going by, however, their interest gradually disappeared. One reason for this seems to be that after several times, the 'extraordinary' experience or feeling will become ordinary and mundane and thus lose its halo. Another reason may be that it cannot change much in reality – although effervescence boosts the feeling of love, this feeling can not be materialised. Loving the feeling of love without the co-presence of both parties, arguably, makes one disillusioned in the end. Nevertheless, it appears that some SPs do experience the joy of and even become addicted to the participation. This makes them treasure their love

even more, and motivates them to produce, reinforce, and enforce the group norms, for they hope that other SPs will also be like them – understanding, supportive, and self-sacrificing. Thus, to a certain extent, HCS helps to reinforce SPs' love to and consolidate their relationships with seafarers. This also indicates that social networks are important in sustaining and cementing the basic social structure – intimate relationships and families, as shown in sub-section 2.2.3 and 2.2.4.

As such, the case of SPs in the HCS does not seem to fit with Giddens, Beck-Beck-Germsheim, and Bauman's theories we reviewed in sub-section 2.1.3, which suggest that people have become individualised and focus on self-satisfaction in doing intimacy. Rather than individually pursuing self-interests, SPs jointly encourage each other to be supportive and sacrificing. It is the group effort that helps SPs to reduce tensions caused by separation. For this reason, as shown in section 7.5, SPs are transformed from 'grousing' to 'happy' women. Thus, the social network in the HCS plays an important role in SPs' practice of doing intimacy with their seafarers. In this sense, as indicated in sub-section 2.2.3, Giddens *et al.*'s theories reflect an individualistic view of the modern society and overlook the reality that individuals and their intimate relationships are embedded in social networks.

8.3 Liberating or repressive?

The norms sustained and reinforced with the aid of the two types of emotional interactions do not change the reality that SPs have to continue suffering long-term separations and that convenient communication is still a problem. The changes seem to be SPs' *perception* of the reality (they normalise and trivialise the difficult situations, and they help each other to obtain a strong feeling of being in love – a lofty sentiment which, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have pointed out, is desired and worshipped by our contemporaries) and the lowering of their expectations. We may ask: is this emancipatory as indicated in Chapter 6 and 7? Or it is implicitly repressive?

Before answering this question, we need to examine what a liberated self is supposed to be. Giddens (1990; 1991) proposes the idea of the 'reflexive self'. As a result of the high level of time-space distanciation in the contemporary world, Giddens argues that the self becomes a 'reflexive project'. Individuals no longer take a traditionally or

customarily fixed way of life for granted. Facing a wide variety of choices, one chooses the most justifiable one in the light of existing information; and in the ever changing world, one keeps taking in new knowledge and information, which in turn reshape one's former choices and remake the self. What justifies choices? Giddens suggests that there are no external criteria and that the reflexive project of the self is internally referential and pursues only self-satisfaction. In his view, the reflexive self acts rationally and is able to break away from the emotional constraints in order to fulfil and realise itself. Thus, for Giddens, the reflexive self is a liberated self that has broken away from both external authorities and internal oppressive emotions. According to this model, SPs in the HCS clearly are repressed. They are helping each other to, on the one hand, soothe tensions, and on the other, boost their affection to their seafarers, which serves to produce group norms. Both the boosted sentiment and constructed norms justify, and subject SPs to, self-sacrificing and suffering associated with absent partners. As a result, SPs are influenced by both internal emotion and external group values.

The concept of the 'reflexive project of the self', however, does not seem realistic (Shillings, 1997), and it has been regarded as an ideology of late modernity (Craib, 1998), for it treats emotion as purely a cultural product which can be rationally managed and even eradicated if it does not bring satisfaction. According to Elias (1987), emotion has both learnt and unlearnt components; though learnt behaviours of humans dominate over unlearnt drives, they are connected and the latter is the foundation of the former. Thus, though we can learn and try to manage and hide emotion, we can never get rid of it. Further, Giddens seems to focus only on emotion management and loses sight that when social actors confirm each other's feelings, they could become emotional and their reflexivity tend to be confined by the sentiment as illustrated in the last sub-section.

On the other hand, being supposedly internally referential, the reflexive self (largely derived from therapeutic literature) appears to be another version of the 'therapeutic self', which, according to Bellah et al.'s (1985/1996: 127) empirical research of contemporary American life, is defined 'by its own wants and satisfactions, coordinated by cost-benefit calculation'. Like the reflexive self, the therapeutic self tries to eliminate external influences and look inwardly for guidance and justification

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to actions. However, Bellah *et al.* note that the therapeutic self presumes an absolutely autonomous and empty self which ignores personal and social reality; and that since there are no means by which the self can ward off influences from outside, the autonomous self is an illusion. For Bellah *et al.*, the therapeutic self reflects a flawed radical individualism. Similarly, Giddens' reflexive self, then, presents a too individualistic view of the self. It fails to acknowledge that individuals' reflexivity is confined by social norms, though the latter may not last as long as they used to in pre-modern societies.

Furthermore, as illustrated in the last section, emotional influences and social norms do not work separately. Instead, they interplay with and feed each other: while the sentiment helps to reinforce norms, the latter may make social actors more susceptible to the effect of the former. Thus, reflexivity always tends to be emotionally tainted and culturally confined. The fact that SPs are not as liberated as the 'reflexive self', then, does not tell us whether the HCS is emancipating or repressive.

Now let us turn to the feminist's perspective. In conceptualising the transformative potential of the Internet, Stone (1996) and Turkle (1995) claim that the use of the Internet would lead people to realise reflexively that the self is fragmented and fluid rather than unified and fixed to the body. This transformative power, Stone and Turkle envisage, would help individuals to deconstruct culturally constructed identities and thus liberate them from social and cultural constraints (for a detailed discussion, see sub-section 2.3.3). Instead of a site for deconstruction, however, we saw that the HCS is a place for construction. Sub-section 8.1.1 shows that SPs constructed a heroic image of seafarers. In response to this image, as indicated in section 8.1, SPs constructed norms and values promoting 'qualified' and good seafarers' wives/partners. Following feminists' criticisms of romantic love described in sub-section 2.1.2, we can say that the HCS helps SPs to romanticise and distort reality, and to construct an ideology which provides a heroic and glorious mask for ordinary seafarers, and which makes SPs believe that suffering is the legitimate route to happiness. Thus, it can be argued from a feminist perspective that the collective values in the HCS are repressive in that they serve to subject SPs to exploitation and make them content with reality.

However, since we always live within history, culture and society, we are bound to construct and subscribe to one or another form of ideology. There is no exit from it and as a result any form of liberation can only be context specific. Therefore, it appears necessary to answer the question taking into consideration the practical and social context that SPs live in (Crossley, 1999). On the one hand, SPs have to face their internal emotional constraint and they are emotionally attached to seafarers. One may argue that SPs would be able to stop their suffering by terminating the relationship. However, it does not seem easy for SPs to cut off their attachment bond to seafarers and to break the relationships at will and without cost to themselves. Severing the bond may be more traumatic for SPs, and agonising for seafarers as well. On the other hand, seafaring careers inevitably entail separation. It is difficult for SPs to change either their boyfriends/husbands' careers or the length of sailing periods[34]. Thus, in the face of both the external social force (their seafarers' career) and the strong internal emotion, SPs tend to be powerless.

In this context, the affective communication and the resultant group values in the HCS give SPs extra confidence and strength to cope with the predicaments discussed in Chapter 5. Further, the social networks formed in the website, as analysed in chapter 6 and 7, provides SPs with several kinds of resources and a sense of belonging. In a popular term, SPs acquire social capital from the HCS which increased their ability to overcome difficulties. As a result, arguably, SPs gain a sense of security and certainty – they have reasons to believe that their beloved are safe and in love with them though far away; they have friends and (generalised) sisters who can understand, accompany, and support them. In a sense, participating in the site contributes to producing a feeling of *everything-in-control-and-business-as-usual*. Maybe for this reason, some SPs achieved a more positive definition of the self and became happier, as suggested in section 7.5. The *everything-in-control* feeling may be argued to be an illusion which is based on a different perception of the reality. Yet, Taylor (1983; 1989, see also Taylor and Brown, 1988; 1994) points out that we are all engaged in constructing

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[34] It may be argued that as individuals, SPs have no influence, but they can use the website to act collectively in order to bring about the necessary changes. However, as shown in chapter 4, political contents and such activities are not allowed in the website and are prohibited under the current political environment in China.

'positive illusions' and that these illusions are essential for successfully coping with crisis. Without illusions, we would probably be overwhelmed and destroyed by insecurity and uncertainty, since the external world is too powerful, potentially dangerous, and unpredictable. In this sense, the HCS enables SPs to jointly create positive illusions which improve their well-being. Under the circumstance that SPs are powerless to change the reality, participating in HCS can be regarded as empowering SPs to see the reality from a different perspective in order to throw a positive light on the self and to help them become more confident and happy.

Conclusion

This final chapter summarises key findings derived from the study, and identifies the contributions of the research to the topic area. A range of policy implications are also drawn out in this chapter. The thesis ends with a final reflection on the doctoral research process along with suggestions for future research.

It has been suggested that modern sexual partnerships are a major source for emotional warmth and support for the involved individuals (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1990). Mansfield and Collard's (1988) research on newly-wed couples also shows that after marriage couples rely primarily on their partners for support. Seafaring couples, however, are likely to endure long term separation, which is likely to not only deprive them of a main source of intimacy, but also cause problems for the couples, such as loneliness, isolation and role displacement (Thomas, 2003; Thomas and Bailey, 2006; Thomas *et al.*, 2003). The contrast between the ideal image of modern partnerships and the reality for seafaring couples arguably puts considerable strain on the relationships. Further, high divorce rates have been a characteristic of modern societies, and in China, divorce rates keep rising (Chen, 2005). Under such circumstances, it seems that the relationships between seafarers and seafarer-partners (SPs) are particularly vulnerable and precarious.

In this context, the current study focused upon a group of Chinese seafarer-partners (SPs) who were participants of the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* (HCS), a discussion website aimed to provide a platform for SPs to communicate with each other in order to alleviate social isolation and other problems that they may meet in everyday life. Section 2.3 showed that the Internet can help its users to expand social networks and search for information. Against this backdrop, this study investigated how seafarer-partners (SPs) used this website to cope with problems associated with separation in general, and examined the following research questions in particular:

- What is the origin of the website? How did it come to be established? How is the website managed? How is the website organised and developed?

- What are the characteristics of the website's SP users? What predicaments do they face? What are their needs?

- How do SPs participate in the HCS? Does their participation help them to alleviate their problems and meet their needs? If it does, how does it achieve this, and what processes and mechanisms are involved?

- What are the perceived impacts of this website upon SP users? Does it liberate SPs, and if so, in what sense?

In the process of addressing these research questions, I took an ethnographic approach, which involved over a period of two years' online participant observation, systematic sampling of twenty threads for thematic analysis, and semi-structured interviews with thirty SP informants and the two managers of the site. In the early stages of the online fieldwork, as described in section 3.2, I actively participated in the website, which helped me to craft a good relationship with the managers and some of the informants. Further, the participation enabled me to learn various strategies of identity management in the website, familiarised me with the technical setting of the website, and gave me insights into other participants' motivations, strategies, and feelings associated with their online activities. In a sense, it endowed me with something of a 'native' status, though the purpose of it was never out of my sight. During the face-to-face interviews, this relationship with the managers demonstrated its value and significance as shown in section 3.3. It was the managers who sponsored my offline fieldwork when I was desperately searching for informants – they organised a group of SP participants for me to interview; they made a posting calling for SPs' co-operation; and they asked another SP to organise a gathering in another city to facilitate my interviews and data collection.

In addition to face-to-face interviews, I also undertook email interviews, though the response rate for these was quite low. One reason for the low response rate seems to be that potential informants could not see any incentive to take part. The qualitative nature of the questions, which demanded a lot of time to type in the answers, especially for those whose typing skill was poor, was the second reason. Several SPs who received the questions complained that there were too many open-ended questions and mentioned that they would have preferred to respond to a more structured questionnaire.

Key findings

In order to make sense of the qualitative data collected for this research, an eclectic theoretical approach was taken. I drew upon several different sets of now classic theories from both social psychology and sociology, including Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory which is helpful in making sense of loneliness and Durkheim's (1976) concept of 'collective effervescence' which illuminates why the participation made SPs more confident about their relationships with seafarers. Hochschild's (1983) emotion management theory is very useful in explaining emotional engagement in the HCS and Mead's (1972) social process of the self helps to illustrate the construction of norms in the website. Other grand and middle-range theories have also been utilised to help 'make sense' of the qualitative data. Next, let us turn to the key empirical findings of this doctoral research project.

A tightly controlled space

Chapter 4 revealed that the HCS was established by a young seafarer who aimed to a communication platform for the seafaring community in China. The name of website – *Home of Chinese Seafarers* – indicated that it primarily targeted seafarers in the beginning. SPs, however, turned out to be the most active group of contributors. As a result, the forum *Communication between Seafarers and SPs* became the most popular and frequently busy one, and contained around one third of all the postings in the entire website. Having noticed this trend and also the main issues that SPs were concerned about, the managers, in response to these users, created several new forums for SPs to discuss these issues. *Gardens for Seafarer-Wives and Children*, *SPs' Club* and *Ship visiting guidance* are examples of these. The establishment and creation of new forums indicate that the management was responsive to its participants' activities.

Chapter 4 also showed that the website was tightly regulated and controlled. This is partially due to the wider political context in China, where all websites are under strict censorship. Appearance of any content related to 'subversive' political issues, such as anti-communist-regime comments, in a website are not tolerated in China by the authorities and thus may result in damaging consequences for the concerned website and its staff and participants. For this reason, the managers of the HCS dared not slacken their policing activities. To avoid any possible and unnecessary trouble, contents associated with any political issues, together with pornographic materials

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were not allowed to appear in the HCS. Postings made had to be seafaring related and consistent with the themes of the forums where they were posted; otherwise, they were likely to be deleted. To effect these, the website had its rules and regulations stipulating the dos and don'ts. Those who broke rules were sanctioned: they were either banned from participation for a period of time or fined in virtual money. It also had a management team consisting of managers and moderators who enforced these rules. Following Foucault (1991), it can be said that the HCS was a carefully controlled and disciplined space, which helped to maintain an orderly atmosphere.

Predicaments of SPs

Section 3.5 showed that SP participants of the HCS tended to be young, well-educated and lived in urban areas; and a large proportion of them were unmarried. The long term absence of seafarers caused various problems for SPs, the details of which have been discussed in Chapter 5. Weiss (1973), inspired by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980), points out that the absence of attachment figures can cause emotional loneliness. The long-term separation temporarily deprived SPs of their husbands/boyfriends to whom they are emotionally attached. As a result, the most acute problem for SPs appeared to be emotional loneliness, which manifested itself in several forms: longing, feeling of emptiness, complaining of seafarers' inability to provide emotional support and perpetual worrying. SPs could hardly avoid longing for their absent loved ones in the period of long separation. Further, the 'loss' of one significant other made some SPs feel that their lives became suddenly empty. Since partnerships were an important source of emotional warmth, SPs wished that their loved ones could offer comfort and encouragement when under work or family pressures. The absent seafarers, however, could hardly provide it. On top of this, the precarious condition of working at sea made many SPs particularly anxious and worried about the safety of their adored ones. Yet, SPs and their absent seafarers lived in different spatio-temporal worlds, and the communication between the shore and the sea remained inconsistent, patchy and inconvenient. As a result, seafarers were out of touch for most of the time. In a sense, this contributed to an almost permanent state of uncertainty for SPs who were not sure what their beloved were doing, where they actually were, and when they might be able to make phone-calls. This uncertainty seemed to exacerbate SPs' emotional loneliness.

SPs also reported discomfort resulting from others' curiosity about the lifestyle of seafaring couples and they felt stigmatised by others' prying eyes and general nosiness. Many SPs were indignant when friends, colleagues, and other acquaintances engaged in discussion of seafarers' infidelity in front of them. Some were uneasy about others' suspicion of their own fidelity to their seafarer lovers/husbands. SPs also complained about the ways people perceived their motivations for choosing a seafarer. On top of these, it was common for SPs family members and friends to be against the relationships with seafarers and very critical of the choice. Further, SPs were likely to suffer social isolation. They had different experiences and lived rather different lifestyles compared to others due to their seafarer lovers/husbands' long term absence. Many of them reported that their non-seafaring friends could not fully appreciate their situation and experiences. Seeing other couples' togetherness and apparent happiness was likely to remind SPs of their separation from their beloved. We have seen how these led some SPs to voluntarily or involuntarily separate themselves from non-seafaring people. They desired to communicate more with other SPs, even though the majority of SPs were geographically separated from each other, since they had similar experiences and thus were able to empathise with each other.

In the face of these problems, SPs wanted to have someone to understand their particular reality and to share their ups and downs. Rather than providing listening ears and comforting words, seafarers' absence generated the above mentioned emotional tensions. SPs seemed to need encouragement and advice to overcome those tensions during the waiting days as suggested in section 6.2. On top of that, the problems with communication were likely to generate either misunderstanding or real problems between seafaring couples. This made some SPs uncertain of their relationships and generated feelings of distress. Analysis of thread postings and interview data suggested that SPs needed support in making sense of such situations. Further, SPs also declared their need to learn about life at sea and to know more information about seafaring careers. Being in love with a seafarer had many challenges and SPs did not seem happy to be left in the states of uncertainty. They were keen to discover what it was like to work at sea and to find out which part of the world their beloved was sailing in.

Mutual support in the HCS

Participating in the HCS, to a certain extent, met some of SPs' overtly expressed needs and helped them to address some of their commonly experienced problems. Firstly, the HCS was able to provide SPs with information about the seafaring career, and SPs also provide each other with informational support, as indicated in section 6.1. Through reading seafarers' postings about life at sea and some SPs' postings about ship visits, and also through actively seeking information by making query type postings, SPs became more informed of seafarers' working and living conditions at sea. They sometime were also able to find out the route, position, and other status of the ship on which their partners were working. These details helped to give SPs a sense of control: they were no longer in the dark but had an idea of what kinds of things could actually happen at sea and where their beloved might be. Furthermore, SPs also provided each other with information regarding cheap and convenient means of communication between the sea and the shore as well as guidance and advice on ship visits. This, arguably, helped seafaring couples to communicate better with each other.

Secondly, as shown in section 6.2, the website provided a platform for SPs to 'meet' with each other and to share their similar experiences. The 'meeting' was textual and disembodied. Yet, textual presentation had a mediating effect and it allowed SPs to articulate certain things that they might not have been willing to express verbally or in more immediate face-to-face situations. Further, the disembodiment offered an anonymous environment for some SPs though not for all. The availability of a group of SPs, the mediating effect and the disembodied environment encouraged SPs to reveal their emotional tensions. According to Hochschild's (1979; 1983) emotion management theory, social actors need to do 'emotion work' to manage their undesired and unpleasant feelings. Sub-section 6.2.3 showed that SPs were engaged in doing collective 'emotion work' to manage negative feelings for each other. An analysis of the sample threads revealed several 'emotion work' strategies, such as providing empathy, offering encouragement and advice, and reframing the situation. These strategies served to normalise the situations, to diffuse the tensions, and to nurture the SP-seafarer relationship. The HCS also provides SPs a space to write their reflections on life and love. When SPs expressed their reflections, others drew upon

their own experiences and feelings to validate, confirm, and legitimate such reflections and thoughts. As such, SPs found understanding and sympathy in the site, instead of alienation and isolation which they might experience in the offline world. These activities also gave rise to a culture and an expectation that SPs in the website should provide each other with some support and care.

Thirdly, in the HCS website, SPs were able to socialise with each other and they tended to enjoy each other's company. On a general level, as discussed in section 6.3, they 'chit-chatted' with each other; they staged their own performances and appreciated those of others. On a personal level, some of them made friends with each other. Drawing upon existing literature (Aristotle, 1955; Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Spencer and Pahl, 2006), Chapter 7 showed that friendships in the HCS involved one or several classical modes of relating: instrumental help, companionship, intimate disclosure, and emotional support. Many SPs perceived some online friendships as quite intimate. With similar experiences and feelings, they felt that they could communicate with their HCS friends with 'soul'. In normal situations, they offered each other companionship by casual talking. When an individual met with problems, however, HCS friends who were close to her would feel a sense of moral obligation to offer her support and encouragement. For some SPs, however, online friendships were seen as rather superficial, since they felt that they only knew one aspect of each other's lives and their joint activities were quite limited. Online friendships were not be always 'placeless'. Many SPs reported that they tended to prioritise friendships with SPs who lived locally so that their friendships could be shifted into offline settings. For these individuals, friendships that could be realised offline were closer and more rewarding, for they could relate to each other in multiple modes, doing many joint activities together such as shopping and dining, and providing each other with practical help.

From the discussions above, we can also see the four typical ways in which SPs participated in the HCS: sharing emotions and feelings, exchanging and collecting information, providing each other with good company, and making and doing friendships. In undertaking these activities, SPs formed an extensive social network and also friendship networks. These networks empowered SPs to pool their resources in order to support each other. In contributing to their network, on the one hand, SPs

'accompanied' each other and spent some time together, which otherwise might have been 'empty' and 'lonely' ; on the other, they helped each other to alleviate various emotional tensions, to make sense of their experiences, and to confirm and validate feelings. These activities, section 7.5 showed, assisted SPs in feeling that their lives were fuller and happier than hitherto. Thus, the networks were a valuable source of social capital for SPs. It enabled SPs to reduce the negativity associated with separation, empowered them to achieve a positive definition of the self, and protected and improved their well-being. In this sense, the HCS was very functional and positively liberating.

Learning and socialisation in the HCS

Participation in the HCS was also a learning process. In this process, SPs collectively constructed, maintained and reinforced a particular set of group norms and values which served to socialise them into the role of 'qualified' SPs (Berger and Luckmann, 1971). Through reading postings in the HCS, SPs became more aware of the nature and implications of seafaring careers. As a result, they understood that seafarers were hard-working in challenging environments. The fact that their beloved seldom informed them about the harshness of working at sea made SPs believe that their boyfriends/husbands did not want them to be unduly worried and concerned. Thus, SPs perceived that their partners were sacrificing themselves for a higher living standard of the families while shielding them from the realities of the sacrifice. This perception constructed a heroic image of seafarers, which motivated SPs to convince each other that they should understand, support and respect their partners' careers and choices. In order to be understanding and supportive, SPs showed, encouraged, and taught each other that they should be able to cope with being alone and not give additional burdens to their partners who had suffered enough at sea. These norms and values, as discussed in section 8.1 constructed a 'qualified' SP image. In this process, SPs learned to adopt a generalised and good SP's position to look back at, evaluate, and reform themselves. This resonates with Mead's (1972) concept of the social process of the self. This self-transformation served to make understanding, supportive and self-sacrificing SPs, that is, 'qualified' SPs.

Drawing upon Durkheim's theory of collective effervescence (1976), section 8.2 showed that these constructed values were further reinforced by the fact that SPs' participation in the HCS was likely to strengthen the emotional bond with their beloved. Reading and writing about seafarers in the HCS enabled many SPs to feel and imagine an emotional closeness with their beloved. In this process of imagination, seafarers seem to be somewhat idealised. The idealisation of seafarers to a certain extent convinced SPs that their love to seafarers was valuable and worthwhile. This feeling in general was manifested explicitly or implicitly in many SPs' writings, which in turn provoked in other SPs the same sentiment and belief. The latter, then, becomes collective. It, as it were, vibrated in the HCS and drew energy from the SP participants to produce effervescence, which contained a powerful force. This force, on the one hand, bound SPs together tightly to reinforce the collective values and cherish their love for seafarers; on the other, it gave SPs confidence to cope with routine challenges and to offer each other support in order to become a 'qualified' SP. Both these functions assisted in consolidating the relationships with seafarers and in reinforcing the group norms.

Contributions of the thesis

Through studying a hitherto under-researched group, this project was able to make several contributions to the subject area. It identified problems and predicament that SPs were likely to face, and brought to light issues relevant to them in details. This helps the outside world to see and understand SPs' experiences and concerns. Needless to say, the seafaring community is important for the global economy – it is estimated that 90 percent of international trade is carried by sea (IMO, 2002). The maintenance of seafaring workforce thus is indispensable. The illumination of SPs' issues and concerns will inform the industry and relevant government bodies in improving the welfare of the seafaring community. We will discuss policy implications in the next section.

The thesis drew a detailed, nuanced, and layered picture of the online space. It described the website's structure and governance, and made visible the techniques (various types of rewards, punishment, and regulations) utilised for controlling and managing the space. Different areas of the site, such as forums, public diary space,

and private messaging space, were also described and analysed, which suggested that SPs used these areas differently. In forums, they provided informational and emotional support to each other regardless they knew each other personally or not. Public diary offered SPs a place to record, and open to others, their daily experiences and activities. Through private online messages, SPs were able to conduct chatting in private with their friends, which helped to maintain and reinforce friendship.

In the process of studying, identifying, and mapping online friendships performed in the website, this thesis threw light on the constraints of the online space for developing and maintaining friendship. Multiple modes of relating and frequent joint activities facilitate friendship development (Mesch, 2005; Mesch and Talmud, 2006). The online environment of the HCS, however, confined SPs joint activities to chatting. Because of the limitation, some SPs preferred to make friends in the site with those living nearby in hope that they could meet and doing practical things together offline. As a result, the finding suggests that online space is not necessarily placeless as commonly perceived, but can be embedded in the offline geography.

Through analysing SPs' emotional activities in the HCS, the study revealed that there were two forms of emotional interactions working in the site. One was emotion management (Hochschild, 1979; 1983) through which SPs collaborated in working on and managing negative feelings; the other was collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1976) which contributed to reinforce, boost, and strengthen SPs' positive and lofty sentiments. These are two distinct types of emotional experiences related to two sociological theories of emotions. Emotion management is about working on (mis)feelings, which are either distressful or unfit with social norms, in order to contain and reduce them; while effervescence captures an occasion in which social actors are encouraged to express and then strengthen socially sanctioned sentiments jointly. Yet, they worked together in the site. This indicates that the two theories can co-exist and be used to complement each other in making sense of the data.

The research project further showed that both forms of interactions not only worked together, but also worked towards the same goal and served to produce the same effect – making 'qualified' SPs. In other words, they collaborated in socialising SPs into a particular role. As illustrated in the empirical chapters, through emotive

engagement as well as informational exchange, SPs produced and reproduced a group sanctioned reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1971; Gergen, 1999). This reality reflected a collective sentiment and belief: seafarers were caring, hard-working and worth loving. Emotions in line with this sentiment were reinforced (Durkheim, 1976; 1984); while those off the track were managed and contained (Hochschild, 1978; 1983). Furthermore, sub-section 8.1.2 also showed that feelings that were against or violating openly the common sentiment were likely to be punished (Durkheim, 1976; 1984). Besides the explicit control through clearly stated rules and regulations as indicated in Chapter 4, then, there was also implicit control through collectively punishing emotive 'deviance'. Those kinds of affective interactions channelled the direction of socialisation in the HCS. In a sense, the HCS encouraged SPs to learn to become a 'qualified' SP. Thus, the thesis demonstrated that emotions played a role in reality construction and socialisation.

The process and direction of the reality construction made visible a tension between empowerment/repression/control. On the one hand, the HCS formed a social network, from which SPs acquired emotional and informational support and friendship. Such support gave them a sense of control and security and enabled them to foster a positive attitude towards life and future. This empowered SPs to achieve a positive definition of the self. On the other hand, the process of construction suppressed certain views offending the collective sentiment and promoted a homogenous belief. As a result, it can be argued that the website helped to produce an ideology, which subjected SPs to a one-sided reality and made them content with their sufferings in the name of romantic love.

The thesis thus illuminated that the HCS was a distinctive space. In this space, multiple activities were going on (rewarding compliant participants, punishing deviants, exchanging information, sharing feelings, developing friendships, and learning from each other), which was caught in the tension between empowerment/control/repression. Through those activities, SPs acquired informational and emotional support and formed social networks. Yet, at the same time, they constructed group norms and values and learnt to be a 'qualified' SP. Instead of a transformative territory for social deconstruction as suggested by Stone (1996) and Turkle (1995), this online space facilitated social construction.

To gain a perhaps more informed understanding of the tension, the study also considered its context. As shown in section 8.3, SPs appeared to be powerless in the face of both the internal emotional force and the external labour market force. On the one hand, SPs were emotionally attached to their partners and cutting off the bond was likely to cause painful feelings to both SPs and seafarers. On the other, SPs were hardly able to change careers of their partners and the length of sailing periods. In this context, participating in the HCS enabled and encouraged them to bracket off negative feelings in order to attain a positive self-image. Maybe the positive definition was an illusion, but it was a 'positive illusion'. According to Taylor (1989), we have to construct positive illusions in order to live a normal life; otherwise the potentially dangerous external environment would overwhelm and devour us.

The findings of the project also suggest that all kinds of relationships in one's social network can interact with each other. It is evident in this study that doing intimacy is not an isolated process but deeply embedded in and affected by wider social networks. It appears safe to say that the resources provided by the network gave SPs confidence and strength to face challenges of maintaining the partnerships. In this sense, SPs were not defending their relationships with their boyfriends/husband alone but together with others. From another angle, then, this study revealed the importance of social networks, including, importantly, online ones, in the society: it not only improves individuals' well-being, but also contributes to the stability of the basic social structure – families (Jerrome, 1984). As we have seen, it was the mutual support from the HCS network that helped SPs to see themselves in a more positive light and inspired them to be more committed to the relationships with their beloved. This may be considered to pose a challenge to the view that in the process of developing, maintaining or terminating relationships, contemporary social actors become individualised: they have to make choices and be responsible for their choices single-handedly and thus only focus on self-interest (Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Bauman, 2003). Such a view seems to have overlooked the embeddedness of intimate relationships.

In terms of research methods, the research process revealed that the researcher's active participation in the field was very helpful in crafting field relations and

gathering and making sense of data. It also emphasised the role of gatekeepers. On the one hand, gatekeepers helped to recruit informants and thus facilitated the research; on the other, by doing so, they might have (either consciously or unintentionally) exerted control on what kinds of informants I could have access. A comparison between email interviewing and traditional face-to-face interviewing showed the relative strengths and weaknesses of each method. While email interviews saved the trouble of travelling and transcribing, the instant verbal exchange in face-to-face interviews made it easier to probe and clarify issues and questions. Further, typing answers of a number of open-ended questions could be time and patience demanding for participants, which might deter potential informants from participating.

Policy implications

The positive identity gained by SPs in the HCS, as mentioned earlier, is perhaps a somewhat 'positive illusion' (Taylor, 1989), since SPs still have to endure long-term separation and the associated problems. No matter how positive it is, an illusion can hardly become solid. SPs can only 'temporarily bracket' their bad feelings and present a positive outlook for each other and themselves. They have little influence to change the actual reality and the frustrating situation of being partnered with an absent seafarer.

Policy makers and shipping companies, however, may have influences and resources to improve the situation for seafaring couples. During the interviews, several SPs complained that one year away at sea is too long to be humane. Shortening sailing contracts, then, may help to alleviate problems associated with separation. Communication is still a problem for seafaring couples. In some ports, for security or other reasons, seafarers are not allowed to go ashore to make phone-calls. In this context, shipping companies and port authorities need to consider providing seafarers with easy and cheap access to communication facilities. Qualitative data in the current study suggest that seafarers and SPs' relationships and well-being might be enhanced if opportunities for them to communicate became more frequent.

This research indicates that the social networks consisting of SPs help to improve SPs' well-being. Such networks enable them to share and validate their experiences

and to pool their resources. They also help to give SPs a sense of belonging. The implications, arguably, go beyond national boundaries and SPs of other nationalities can also benefit from similar networks. As a result, it might be advisable that SP welfare organisations in other countries help to set up similar online networks in order to bring more geographically separated SPs onboard.

It has been suggested that SPs play an important role for seafarers' well-being. On the one hand, seafarers rely heavily on their partners' social networks, since their ability for developing and maintaining their own ones are severely constrained by their careers (Thomas, 2003; Thomas and Bailey, 2006). On the other, the fact that seafarers may have difficulties to initiate and continue friendships with other people makes them increasingly dependent on their partners for intimacy and emotional support (Thomas, 2003). In this context, it is in shipping companies and seafarers' trade unions' interest to protect and improve the welfare of seafarer-partners (SPs), since the latter is intertwined with seafarers' general well-being. It is advisable, then, for shipping companies and trade unions to set up various social networks (both online and offline) for SPs and to facilitate SPs' networking with each other. The wider benefits to all concerned are likely to be significant. Further, it may be anticipated that the policy implications mentioned above will be of relevance to other occupational groups, such as those in the military, oil platform workers, and global migrant workers who leave their families behind.

For some SPs, we have seen, the online community was not as rewarding as the offline one. While they could only chat online, they were able to pursue other activities together offline. Therefore, it would be beneficial if shipping companies and trade unions facilitated contact among SPs living in proximity. Since seafarers work for different companies, it would be much better if shipping companies could work together to do this. Such an initiative could generate wider benefit for employees and their families and partners. Certainly, the focus should not be just on those 'legal' seafarers' wives, but should also include unmarried SPs.

As indicated earlier, the HCS tended to promote positive feelings while repressing opposite opinions. This might make some SPs unwilling to openly vent their 'less romantic' experiences and realities in the public space. (In private space, such as QQ

and MSN, they may be able to make negative comments.) In order to cater for different needs of different SPs, it may also be advisable that social networks, either online or offline, accommodating SPs' negative views need to be created and provided.

Reflections on the research process and suggestions for future research

Certainly, this doctoral research is very modest; it has been conducted single-handedly and has been an important learning process. Clearly, being an 'apprentice researcher' had its implications. My male researcher identity clearly constrained the data collection. Arguably, it discouraged some SPs from participating in the research. This does not mean, however, that I cannot develop friendships with them. On reflection, I realize that I was not proactive enough in crafting field relationships. Although I actively participated, the participating activity served more to present a desirable self than to make friends with others. If I had put more energy and effort in replying to SPs and chatting with them, I might be able to develop personal relationships with many SPs. Such relationships possibly would have helped the recruitment of informants. Furthermore, through chatting, I might have also acquired a better and more intimate understanding of them.

Inevitably, the limited resources and doctoral candidature time also meant that I could only focus upon a relatively narrow area. Fieldwork therefore mainly concentrated on two particular forums and the diary space of the website. It must be remembered, however, that SPs also participated in other forums and spaces. Therefore, some parts of SPs' activities in the HCS may not have been adequately captured, reflected, and portrayed in this thesis. There are also several other seafaring websites serving in China, which I did not venture into. Had I examined and compared a few of them, arguably, I may have gained other insights into how the actual management of a website shaped its participants' behaviour. Moreover, old and traditional face-to-face seafaring networks and communities still exist in some Chinese cities but these are not visible in the present study. We do not know how SPs interact with each other in those offline communities, let alone the difference between the online and offline ones. A comparative study would be useful in shedding light on how the online setting and its unique features affect SPs' interactions. Furthermore, this current study is limited to Chinese SPs and as a result we do not know how SP communities in

other nations provide mutual support, the knowledge of which arguably would yield a better understanding of how the cultural context shapes and affects SPs activities.

Clearly, there is a need for further, in-depth, and comparative work on the ways in which SPs in different groups and cultures understand their lives and interact with each other. Such research work would shed important light on how cultural and technical settings and contexts shape and influence SPs' emotion and intimate relationships with seafarers in particular and other people's practice of doing intimacy in general.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Access E-mail to the Manager

Dear Mr. Manager,

First, I would like to introduce myself. I am from Shandong, graduated from Shanghai Maritime University in 1996, and then worked in COSCO Qingdao as a seafarer for seven years. At present, I am doing a research degree at Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), Cardiff University. My brief profile is available at http://www.sirc.cf.ac.uk/Nippon%20Fellows/lijun.html.

The purpose of this email is to ask for permission for me to study in the website-*Home of Chinese Seafarers*. The study aims at investigating the impact of the website on seafarer-partners' lives. I happened to find this website and the posts here reminded me of my former seafaring life. Therefore I decided to do this research, which will help the outside world develop a better understanding of seafarer-partners' lives and their concerns. The research has the potential to inform future maritime policy making. I would therefore like to observe the activities in this website and contact some seafarer-partner users for interviewing. Meanwhile, I also want to interview you regarding the routine management of this website.

I would be very grateful if you could allow me to conduct my observation in this website and accept my interview invitation. Your anonymity and confidentiality will of course be assured. Your real name is not required. What you talk about will be translated into English and only be used for the research purposes. No part of my thesis will be available in Chinese, thus you will not be identified by any means.

If you need more information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at TangL1@cf.ac.uk.

Looking forward to your reply and best wishes,

Lijun Tang

Appendix 2: Access E-mail to Face-to-Face Interviewees

Dear **,

First, I would like to introduce myself. I am from Shandong, graduated from Shanghai Maritime University in 1996, and then worked in COSCO Qingdao as a seafarer for seven years. At present, I am doing a research degree at Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), Cardiff University. My brief profile is available at http://www.sirc.cf.ac.uk/Nippon%20Fellows/lijun.html.

The purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in my study, which aims at investigating the impact of the *Home of Chinese seafarers* website on seafarer-partners' lives. I happened to find this website and the posts here reminded me of my former seafaring life. Therefore I decided to do this research, which will help the outside world develop a better understanding of seafarer-partners' lives and their concerns. The research has the potential to inform future maritime policy making. I would therefore like to talk face-to-face with some seafarer-partner users who live in Shanghai or nearby regions in this November or December. I would appreciate listening directly to their views and discussing their usage of the website. .

I found your information on the website's User Database. I would be very grateful if you could spare some time to talk with me about your experiences online in this website. Your anonymity and confidentiality will of course be assured. Your real name is not required. What you talk about will be translated into English and only be used for the research purposes. No part of my thesis will be available in Chinese, thus you will not be identified by any means. If you agree to an informal interview you will be free to withdraw from the study at any stage and the information you provide will not be used if you anticipate any difficulties arising from your participation.

I would be grateful for a direct response from you indicating your willingness or non-participating in the research. If you need more information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at TangL1@cf.ac.uk.

Looking forward to your reply and best wishes,

Lijun Tang

Appendix 3: Participant Information Message

Dear all,

First, I would like to introduce myself. I am from Shandong, graduated from Shanghai Maritime University in 1996, and then worked in COSCO Qingdao as a seafarer for seven years. At present, I am doing a research degree at Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), Cardiff University. My brief profile is available at http://www.sirc.cf.ac.uk/Nippon%20Fellows/lijun.html.

The purpose of this email is to inform you that I will gather data from this website for my study, which aims at investigating the impact of the *Home of Chinese seafarers* website on seafarer-partners' lives. I happened to find this website and the posts here reminded me of my former seafaring life. Therefore I decided to do this research, which will help the outside world develop a better understanding of seafarer-partners' lives and their concerns. The research has the potential to inform future maritime policy making. I would therefore like to observe and select some postings randomly from this website.

I will ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Any user-name attached to the data I collected will be replaced by a pseudo-name. What I collected from this website will be translated into English and only be used for the research purposes. No part of my thesis will be available in Chinese, thus nobody will be identified by any means. This study will do no harm to anybody. However, if you want to be excluded from this study, you can inform me by sending an email to TangL1@cf.ac.uk. Then I will delete the data collected that are associated with you. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at TangL1@cf.ac.uk.

Best wishes,

Lijun Tang

Appendix 4: Access Message to Email Interviewees

Dear **,

First, I would like to introduce myself. I am from Shandong, graduated from Shanghai Maritime University in 1996, and then worked in COSCO Qingdao as a seafarer for seven years. At present, I am doing a research degree at Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), Cardiff University. My brief profile is available at http://www.sirc.cf.ac.uk/Nippon%20Fellows/lijun.html.

The purpose of this message is to invite you to participate in my study, which aims at investigating the impact of the *Home of Chinese seafarers* website on seafarer-partners' lives. I happened to find this website and the posts here reminded me of my former seafaring life. Therefore I decided to do this research, which will help the outside world develop a better understanding of seafarer-partners' lives and their concerns. The research has the potential to inform future maritime policy making. I have some interview questions. If you can spare some time to answer them through emails, please let me know your email address, so that I can send the questions to you. Your participation would be appreciated. .

I found your information on the website's User Database. I would be very grateful if you could spare some time to talk with me about your experiences online in this website. Your anonymity and confidentiality will of course be assured. Your real name is not required. What you talk about will be translated into English and only be used for the research purposes. No part of my thesis will be available in Chinese, thus you will not be identified by any means. If you agree to an informal interview you will be free to withdraw from the study at any stage and the information you provide will not be used if you anticipate any difficulties arising from your participation.

If you need more information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at TangL1@cf.ac.uk.

Looking forward to your reply and best wishes,

Lijun Tang

Appendix 5: Interview Questions for Seafarer-Partner Users

Biographical section:

1. Age, job, education, marital stuatus

Discovery and beginning to use:

1. When and how did you find this website?

2. What was your first impression of this website?

3. How often do you log on this website? Where do you access to the Internet?

Motivations:

1. Which features of this website impressed and attracted you? Can you explain the reasons?

2. Did you have contact with other seafarer-partners before using this website?

3. In offline world, who do you usually turn to talk about issues regarding the relationship with your boyfriend or husband? Compared to chatting with offline friends or family members, what difference do you think chatting with members online makes?

4. What do you feel when your threads receive replies and when they hardly get any reply? What kinds of follow-up action are you likely to take?

Types of usage:

1. Which functions of this website have you tried (reading posts, writing posts, writing diary, sending private messages, virtual marriage, etc)? How often do you use each of these functions? What have you got from using each of these functions?

2. Which forum(s) of this website do you favour? Can you explain the reasons?

3. Is there any difference in your usage of this website between when your partner is home and when he is at sea?

4. How regularly do you post messages on this website? What kind(s) of messages do you like to initiate or respond? Can you explain a little and give some examples?

Perceived impact:

1. In which aspect(s) do you think this website is helpful or useful to you? And why?

2. Besides contact with other members online, do you have contact with them in other ways (telephone, MSN)? If you do, how often?

3. Do you have online friends? If you do, how many? How would you describe your friendship with other members?

4. If this website disappeared, how would it affect you?

5. To whom would you like to recommend this website? Can you explain the reasons?

6. In what ways do you think this website has changed your present life, compared to that of the past before using the website?

Perception of other users:

1. What do you think of the experiences people described on this website? To what extent do you think they are real? What makes you think so?

2. Do you think members care about others' real identity? If you think so, how do you think members usually check others' identity?

3. There is a ranking system working in this website. How do you think this will affect members' participation? Why?

Other questions:

1. Are there any issues that you think should not be discussed on this website? Why?

2. To what extent would you say that you are 'hooked' to this website? Does it significantly reduce your time spent in offline interactions with friends and parents? If it does, how do you think this affects you?

3. Are there other things that you want to mention?

Appendix 6: Interview Questions for Managers

Establishment

1. When did you establish this website?

2. What motivated you to set this website up?

3. What are the aims and objectives of setting up this website? Have these aims and objectives achieved?

General information

1. Can you describe the evolving process of this website?

2. Did you meet with any problems? If you did, what were the problems, when/at what stage?

3. What strategies did you use to attract users?

4. Which forum is the most popular one? In you opinion, what makes this forum popular?

5. According to your observation, which group (students seafarers, seafarers, seafarer-partners, etc.) contributes most to this website?

Motivations of and impact to seafarer-partners

1. According to your observation, what are the topics that seafarer-partner users are interested in? What are the topics that they are not interested in? Can you give some examples?

2. In your opinion, what features of this website attract seafarer-partner users? Why do you think so?

3. What kinds of contribution do you think this website makes to seafarer-partner users? What makes you think so?

Management

1. As a manager, what are you daily tasks to manage this website?

2. What kinds of posts are not welcome in this website? Why? How often do unwanted posts appear? What actions are taken against such posts and those users who post such posts?

3. Who choose/sack forum moderators and what are the criteria?

Other

1. These are all my questions. Do you have something else that you may want to mention?

Appendix 7 List of SP Interview Participants

Name	Age (/range)	Marital Status	Education	Length of the Relationship/ Marriage(year)
Breeze	42	Married	University Graduate	16
Flying-Fish	35	Married	University Diploma	12
V-Boat	31-35	Married	University Diploma	4
Golden-Eye	33	Married	University Diploma	9
Smiling-Face	30	Married	University Diploma	3
Green-Pepper	26-30	Married	University Graduate	4
Rose	26-30	Married	University Graduate	4
Butter-Fly	26-30	Married	University Graduate	2
Helena	29	Married	University Diploma	2
Ayaya	29	Married	University Diploma	2
Lady-X	21-25	Married	University Graduate	1
Dream	26-30	Un-Married	University Diploma	1
Dove	26-30	Un-Married	University Diploma	3
Snow	27	Un-Married	Postgraduate Student	6
Blue-Elf	27	Un-Married	Postgraduate Student	8
Mermaid	25	Un-Married	University Diploma	2
Rain	25	Un-Married	University Graduate	3
Didi	21-25	Un-Married	University Diploma	2
Anna	21-25	Un-Married	University Graduate	1
Rainbow	21-25	Un-Married	University Diploma	4
Diana	21-25	Un-Married	University Student	3
Willow	21-25	Un-Married	University Graduate	3
Susan	21-25	Un-Married	University Diploma	2
Crystal-Heart	21-25	Un-Married	Vocational Training	4
Yangtze-Girl	24	Un-Married	University Graduate	4
Lovely-Dolphin	24	Un-Married	University Graduate	8
Mary	24	Un-Married	University Student	4
Spring	24	Un-Married	University Diploma	2
Lily	22	Un-Married	University Student	2
Lala	21	Un-Married	University Diploma	3