

A New Mission Tool in Creative Access Nations: Christian Virtual Community in China

by *Enoch J. Kim*

The house church movement of China is in desperate need of an infrastructure for communication. Over my fifteen years in China, I have seen many Chinese house churches and their leaders suffer because of the lack of freedom. Naturally, because many of their house church programs and activities function under a veil of secrecy, they have difficulty communicating with the outside world, and even networking among themselves. I have struggled to determine just how churches within a creative access nation might engage in alternative forms of communication.

This article is my response to this challenge.¹ It is based on research regarding our ability to harness global communications technology to build a virtual community model for missions. Because of its two-way communication function and freedom from geographical limitations, a virtual community model seems to have a huge potential as an effective alternative to other communication tools in the creative access nations.² I want to suggest several new ways to enhance current Christian websites and promote effective virtual communities. I'll also suggest a new master plan for real world church planting using a virtual space communication network. Ways to effectively harness the talents of scholars, missionaries, and churches to bolster the strength of online evangelism plan are included here. However, the crucial factor in this plan is still the local church's initiative.

In creative access nations, where there are limitations to open evangelism and discipleship, building virtual communities seems to be an appropriate supplementary tool to help local churches with this need. Of course, there is intervention and checking from a higher realm in the Internet world. Christian Internet activity could also easily become suppressed or strictly regulated. However, from my surveys, I was astonished to discover that many healthy Christian online networks are actively running today in China.

This article specifically focuses its research on the YEU-Chinese and other YEU-classes in Chinese minority groups. YEU is an acronym for the young, educated, and urbanized Chinese. As such, the hypothesis posed here is that

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the YEU class as an emerging group with modern leadership skills and as early adopters of new information are well placed to influence their own larger people group in the future in highly significant ways. Whether Muslims or majority Chinese, the YEU class consistently demonstrates a preference for personal, mobile, digital, multimedia tools that are quickly accessible and customizable.³

Given the YEU's media preferences, this article delves further into research about the YEU and implications of the group's media preferences in terms of new evangelism methods directed at them. At the center of these YEU media preferences are the current tools of computers and the Internet. Nevertheless, traditional mission approaches with the older and more familiar technology of radio or printed media, approaches which struggle in creative access nations where there is lack of religious freedom, can be revolutionized by the full-broadcasting capability of the Internet.

One by-product of current Internet technology is a social networking which creates virtual communities across virtual space. I anticipate that Christian activities initially forming as virtual communities can provide alternative communication tools for churches in creative access nations. Consequently, no matter the specific external circumstances, a relative freedom to share ideas and get information will ensue, freeing collective imagination and creativity, allowing the church to operate effectively within its specific socio-political setting. Therefore, the development of virtual space communities should provide a more effective approach for evangelizing unreached people groups around the world where the Internet is accessible.

To determine the probability of using a virtual community model successfully in creative access nations, this article summarizes both theoretical approaches and field research results regarding the virtual community movement in China.

Research Design and Sampling Plan

Actual field research was done on the virtual community situation in China. The key problem we faced in this survey was the lack of understanding of Christian virtual community and the lack of effectiveness of current Internet mission strategies for China.

There are four research questions in addressing this problem:

1. What is the current Internet users' situation in China?



2. What are the Internet missions to China doing?
3. How do Internet missions and virtual community mission strategy work in China?
4. What is an effective strategy for planting actual 'offline' churches through virtual community?

In order to gather the necessary information, I used ten questionnaires to gather standardized observations from 60 recommended websites.⁴ Rather than asking participants direct questions, as is traditionally done with questionnaires, the websites were evaluated using a questionnaire. Therefore, the method relied on both a questionnaire and observation. To guarantee reliability and reduce the potential subjectivity of an external observation, our researchers and native speaking coworkers joined as Internet community members, and observed the members' behavioral patterns. That is, because the researcher joined the community, the process was

more likely to provide an emic view from these case studies.

Data Report to China's Current Internet User Situation

In 2008 China became the country with the largest number of Internet users in the world—235.1 million users.⁵ In January of 2007, the demographic report of The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) defined the typical Internet user as one aged 6 and above who is online at least one hour over a week.⁶ An analysis of this report distinguishes several clear characteristics of Chinese Internet users: they are the YEU we spoke of earlier. First, the Chinese Internet users are young. More than half of them were younger than twenty-four years old, and more than 70 percent were younger than thirty years old, and 57.8 percent were unmarried.⁷ Second, Chinese Internet users are educated. More than 83 percent of users have more than a high school diploma. Moreover, a large number of these Internet users appear amenable to pursuing higher levels of education in the near future.⁸ Third, the Chinese Internet users are urbanites. According to mobile phone and Internet users' locations, about 83 percent of users live in an urban setting.⁹ Therefore, a large portion of China's Internet users are of the YEU group.

Two Groups: Tendencies toward Forming Community

The first step of analyzing the sample involved categorizing them into two groups, *high tendency* and *low tendency*, according to how actively they tried to form both online and offline communities (see Table 1 on page 186). The question asked of the sites was whether they had a plan for building a virtual community. Naturally, those that seem to have plans for a virtual community identified themselves by checking more answers and were categorized in the high tendency group. Those with few answers, or those seeming to have a plan but with few answers, were categorized as low tendency. Based on

this, twelve sample sites were categorized into the low group, and thirteen into the high group.

However, further questions needed to discover just what these sites were targeting, so we introduced two questions to sort out their goals and their primary receptor groups (Table 2 on page 186). Since the high and low tendency sample numbers were not the same (thirteen and twelve), the numbers are expressed as percentages for equal comparison. You'll note that among the high group samples, 46 percent seemed to seek to build a virtual community, and 15 percent seemed to have a plan for offline community from the beginning. On the other hand, lower group samples were very passive in forming offline community. Only 25 percent of the low group had virtual community planning, and none of them had offline community plans. Therefore, developing online and offline communities seems to require planning before designing a website toward that end.

In Table 3 (p. 186), when we asked about primary recipients, websites did not seem to target specific recipients. Especially for our purposes, note that only 31 and 17 percent of websites in each group seems to be designed for YEU Chinese. Web designers need to have more strategic approaches because most of Chinese web users are YEU groups.¹⁰

We also wanted to check what kinds of cultural and social themes the websites use for screening out general users from their primary receptor group. A shocking result is that no matter how high or low the group tendency, about half of all sites do not seem to have any screening systems for users, like having a membership system or focusing on special themes to attract specific groups of web users. People from any background can join these current sites if they just agree to the policy. This kind of membership system cannot screen users. If the site deals with special themes, tools, or programs and intends only a specific group of users to join, these systems and themes can

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automatically screen proper members. But, as Table 4 (p. 186) indicates, websites generally did not have a cultural screening system for their users, except that consideration of social situation and ethnic issues in high tendency groups was slightly higher than in low groups.

Most of the high tendency groups and more than half of the low tendency groups used direct methods for evangelism. Approximately 38 percent of the high tendency group tried to meet members' felt needs as they introduced the gospel. Since most of sites seem to be designed for Christian believers, the sites were more likely to be information networks for Christians themselves rather than primarily for introducing the gospel.

The high tendency group are slightly more user friendly, and they have a higher percentage of multiple functions: web searching tools, weather forecasting, opportunities to locate old friends, cafés, blogs, and virtual communities (Table 6 on p. 186). You'll note that one of the crucial functions is linking with other sites, especially in advertising the site to new visitors. Seventy percent of the sites could link to other sites, but most of them were linked to other Christian sites, not secular ones. This means it may not be easy for both seekers and non-Christians to find these sites. Though some of the websites introduced the gospel indirectly through secular professional interests, these were very few. Most of the free downloadable content consisted of Christian materials—gospel songs, apologetics articles, the Bible—which would be of little interest to non-Christians.

The primary condition for forming a virtual community is maximizing the Internet's two-way communication functionality (Table 7 on p. 186). This would indicate their readiness for an offline community. Yet, none of the sites offered

a two-way communication system that enables users to have conversation, such as you find in counseling. One interesting fact is that none of the websites in the low tendency group had counseling or debate functions, but fifty-four percent of the high tendency group did.

While most of sites offered the manager's email address, phone number, and postal address, most sites were unfortunately not ready to encourage or channel users into an offline community. In fact, as you can see in Table 8 (p. 186), only one case proved ready to introduce people in person; however, even in this case, the strategy only offered a small amount of group management, rather than any systematic church planting.

Amidst all this data, there were several cases of spontaneous networking, where website members tried to organize themselves into offline communities from the online community. On one website, the *Christian Student Web*, there were links to local virtual communities. On one occasion, a Christian looking for a campus Christian community received six replies on the site. Another private Christian website in China's Shenzhen City, *Light of Spiritual Love*, had online community groups and offered an offline community meeting.¹¹ This was a good example of how the community develops from online to offline by including the time and place of regular meetings and a contact person's phone, email, and MSN address. Then there is the *Chinese Christian's Blog* website which has facilitated the formation of a virtual community among Chinese Christians by using a blog.¹² They fall into geographic districts in which members choose their common concerns and topics. And then there's the Christian lawyer from WenZhou who provided online law consulting for free or at a low price. In the middle of such web consulting, the lawyer introduced the gospel.¹³

Table 1: High and Low Tendencies for Forming Virtual Communities.

	Low Tendency Group	High Tendency Group	
Number of answers checked	between 0-3	between 4-7	Total
Doesn't seem to have plan for virtual community	8 sites	0 sites	8 sites
Seems to have plan for virtual community	4 sites	13 sites	17 sites
Totals	12 sites	13 sites	25 sites

Table 2: Website Goals.

Goals	High Tendency (%)	Low Tendency (%)
Minister to missionaries	0	0
Introduce the gospel	100	58
Provide Christian information	62	83
Build Chinese virtual community	46	25
Build offline community	15	0
Provide agents for offline community	0	0
Other	0	8

Table 3: Primary Recipients.

Receipients	High Tendency (%)	Low Tendency (%)
Foreign missionaries	0	0
Chinese all over the world	23	8
Young, educated, and urban Chinese	31	17
General Chinese Muslim	0	0
Young, educated, and urban Chinese Muslims	0	0
General Chinese in mainland	85	83

Table 4: User Screening.

Focus of Screening	High Tendency (%)	Low Tendency (%)
No screening system	46	58
Appropriate themes	46	33
Appropriate education level	15	17
Cultural context	31	33
Social situation (job, locality, preference)	15	8
Ethnic group issues	0	0
Touching felt needs	31	31
Using special language	0	0
Discussing their religion	0	0

Table 5: Evangelism Methods.

Methods	High Tendency (%)	Low Tendency (%)
Directly introduce	92	58
Touching felt needs	38	25
Cultural themes, common ground (filial piety, life issues, etc.)	8	0
Others	8	25

Table 6: Attraction of Newcomers.

Choices	High Tendency (%)	Low Tendency (%)
Provide a variety of tools	62	25
Linked to other sites	77	75
Offer rewards	8	0
Free downloads	92	42
Online counseling/debates	54	0
Christian yellow pages	31	8
Updating secular/Christian news, events	31	42
Provide more secular and professional materials (e.g., medical news and experts)	31	17
Others	0	17

Table 7: Two-Way Communication Functions.

Functions	High Tendency (%)	Low Tendency (%)
No functions	0	8
Email, message	92	75
Dialogue board	85	50
Chatting	31	8
Audio/video communication	0	0
Provide contact information	85	58

Table 8: Readiness for Offline Community.

Readiness Functions	High Tendency (%)	Low Tendency (%)
Do not provide services	92	100
Persons are ready to contact	8	0
Organization is ready to contact	0	0
Local churches are ready to contact	0	0
Others	0	0
Provide contact information	0	0

An Interpretation

The good news is that techniques for developing a virtual community in China were far more developed than expected. In contrast to the fact that many Western and Korean church websites employ a one-way communication method—static pages, video sermon, and announcements—many Chinese Christian sites were equipped with hyperlinks connecting to a variety of functions. In addition to static pages, they offered forums, blogs, photo galleries, calendars, events, and many communication systems. These abundant two-way communication systems offered a fertile ground for forming online communities in China. In order to build an offline community among Chinese, there are several areas that need to be developed for an Internet strategy.

1. Many of the websites' goals need to have a clearer focus. Many of their primary receptor groups were the general Chinese population, and many sites did not have a screening system for their members.
2. There is a need of improving the strategies for evangelism to non-Christians. Only a few sites seem to meet the needs of seekers and non-believers. Of these sites, two-thirds of their methods were direct evangelism, and most of their data and documents were for the discipleship of believers. Redesigning the site with specific cultural themes will allow the sites to have highly concentrated target users only.
3. The sites need to offer a variety of service to attract users. The content and functions were too simple to be attractive. Additionally, most of their hyperlinks were linked with other Christian sites, not with secular sites. This disconnects the network from the secular world and reduces the chance of contact with non-Christians. As a result, the community can become a Christian ghetto.

The key to the whole process of offline church planting is the activity and involvement of local church members.

4. Many of the websites' discipleship programs need to be more active in order to hold users' attention. Similar to department store sites, they passively wait for visitors to choose them. With this approach, the site may not easily attract visitors to enter and stay.
5. Both the local church-initiated web management and offline community-building were poor. Many domestic sites seemed to get help from foreign missions though they gave their domestic address in the sites. The key to the whole process of offline church planting, however, is the activity and involvement of local church members. The lack of experts for the local situation also seemed to be a serious problem.
6. More systematic plans for building offline communities are important. So far, it seems that very few churches and individuals have successfully developed offline communities from online communities. It is necessary to educate and encourage local churches to take initiative in virtual community projects.

A Master Plan for Online to Offline Church Planting

Based upon field research in China and my assessment of the current social environment, I suggest that an integrated ministry plan of church planting through virtual community become a model applied to creative access nations. There are three steps in weaving a virtual community model into a ministry plan: (1) Website design and virtual approach, (2) Offline meeting for evangelism, and (3) Discipleship and formation of an offline church. The earlier stages depend on online tools, but as seekers participate in

the later stage, the online presence becomes a supplementary one, with offline interaction assuming a prominent role in the community.

Step 1: Website Design and Virtual Approach

When web design teams plan the first stages of their websites, it is important to keep the final picture in mind—an offline church. In this initial stage, the issue is how to make the site easy to access and attractive to their primary target users. For this, those websites need to provide three elements: links with appropriate sites, the opportunity to touch felt needs, and the cooperation of interpersonal networks.

Local churches in China need to participate in this process from the outset. Along with the local church, international teamwork is important for a virtual community project. Even before the website is designed, web designers, supporters, foreign churches, communication experts, ethnographers, and sociologists need to share ideas and plan the whole process together with the local church. The emphasis on the local church does not mean that expatriate roles would be diminished, but rather changed. Expatriates can provide foreign networks, resources, and experts to assist the local person who needs the website.

It is important to advertise and provide links at non-Christian sites frequently visited by the intended target audience. Since many of the YEU Chinese are familiar with Internet bars, accessing the Internet is very convenient in China. As they develop a positive attitude toward the gospel, an offline team can develop personal relationships.

But for this to happen, sites should connect with the target receptor users' needs, not just purely introduce the gospel. Again, to accomplish this, web designers, communication experts, ethnographers, social anthropologists,

and local church leaders need to cooperate. Some will address appropriate cultural themes, while other expertise is mobilized to discern how to touch those needs.

In designing for receptors' needs, having hypermedia in the website moves beyond just static pages and is recommended for building any potential community. Hypermedia can include blogs, discussion tables, and forums, offering many kinds of opportunities for communication. Additionally, hypermedia websites can facilitate the creation of many small communities, so that they can independently meet any social group's unique needs. Such small groups are also relatively safe when persecution comes.

Following this first step, the local church's role will become crucial. This means that by the local church's leading, they need to prepare both an online team and an offline team. The initial design of the website must ensure a high probability of success in developing online activities into offline meetings. One example is the way Christian medical websites facilitate the relationship between their offline agents and local clients. The agent may physically visit patients offline, comfort the families, and work between virtual contacts and the web medical experts. This is a model I'd like to push towards.

Step 2: Offline Meeting

The local church should lead offline activity that grows out of online activity. The offline team members should have already participated in virtual activities as community members, so some who had been seekers in virtual community are already familiar with each other as they enter an offline setting. As the relationship between the offline team and the seekers matures, they should proceed to evangelize. In some cases, they may need to connect with a totally different website for assistance in evangelism, a site the content of which includes an introduction to the gospel and spiritual encouragement.

Step 3: Online and Offline Discipleship

At this stage, the online community and its system becomes a supplementary tool, as the offline community becomes the major network for discipleship. This new contextualized offline church helps define the new identity of believers, has a culturally appropriate worship style, prayer, and praise style, and instructs believers on strategies to study the Bible. The final goal of this whole process is to let seekers in creative access nations direct their own indigenous churches by using online and offline communities.

Conclusion

As one who works in the country with the largest number of Internet users in the world, where the majority of users are the YEU Chinese, I feel compelled to approach this layer of society through the strategic use of the Internet. In creative access nations like China, building a virtual community is a new alternative and supplementary tool to help local churches. The Internet is free from geographical limitations, and the opportunities for multiple forms of communication enable the formation of virtual communities. I believe Internet mission is a proper alternative in a country where there is a certain amount of persecution and oppression, where there are not enough offline churches, and where there is a lack of Christian resources.

But to be effective in this strategic opportunity, Internet missions need to be culturally sensitive, strategic, and networkable with local churches, foreign missions, and other resources. Local churches and expatriates need to cooperate in website development and use the sites to plant future offline churches. To be successful, Internet missions need to integrate with the local church's active evangelism and discipleship strategies. At the same time, foreign resources should not be excluded, but should serve the local churches' new online and offline communities with their resources from within and outside of China. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ This article is based upon a field survey of my Ph.D. dissertation and its context is China.

² Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk defined a creative access nation as "a country which limits or forbids the entry of Christian missionaries and for which alternative legal means of entry are required to enable Christians to live for Christ" in Johnstone and Mandryk, *Operation World: 21st Century Edition*. (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Publishing, 2001), p. 755. This article is based on this definition of Creative Access Nation.

³ Kim, J. Enoch, "Receptor-Oriented Communication for Hui Muslims in China: With Special Reference to Church Planting." Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pp. 207-211.

⁴ From the sixty recommended websites, I screened appropriate samples through specific criterion, primarily whether that the each site had a mission to mainland China. I used SPSS (v 13.0) and Microsoft Excel for analyzing and calculating the data. Since, all the websites were public sites, this article determined that sensitivity to any security issues was the responsibility of the websites owners.

⁵ See, "Worldwide Internet Users Top 1.5 Billion in 2008: China Tops 235M Internet Users." In *eTForecasts*, Juliussen, Egil, www.etforecasts.com/products/ES_intusersv2.htm#1.3, updated 2007, accessed August 30, 2010.

⁶ The title of report is "CNNIC Released the 19th Statistical Survey Report on Internet Development in China," www.cnnic.cn/html/Dir/2007/02/05/4432.htm, updated January 2007, accessed July 13, 2007.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.63.

¹⁰ Even though these few sites were specifically targeting YEU groups, it should be considered that, according to the analysis of the CNNIC report, since Chinese Internet users are mainly YEU, the users are automatically screened as part of the YEU group.

¹¹ This is a Chinese version website, 灵爱之光, www.godislove.cn/forum_view.asp?forum_id=11&view_id=1867, updated 2007, accessed June 12, 2007.

¹² This is a Chinese version website, and its address is www.ccblog.net, accessed June 17, 2007.

¹³ This is a Chinese version website, 基督徒法律网, www.jdfw.com/, updated 2005, accessed June 15, 2007.