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Abstract
Chinese society is characterized by emerging fragmentation and by the coexistence of traditional and Western values, goals and norms. In this multifaceted environment bi-cultural selves, which encompass social and individual orientations, may emerge. The aim of this paper is to explore if features of bi-cultural selves concerning interactions, emotions, and values are reflected in online public discussions in China. In order to address this question, we explored two of the most popular bulletin board systems (BBSs): Tian Ya and Feng Huang Forums. BBSs attract almost one third of Internet users in China and provide these users with a forum to carry out public dialogue; BBSs are thus an ideal place to study how the self is socially shaped in public communication. A sample of 6109 messages was subjected to quantitative content analysis. Results show that twofold self-construal, corresponding to the individual- and social-oriented self, are (also) detected in BBSs forum content: direct and polemic content coexist with conciliatory content; ego-focused and other-focused emotions are almost equally as frequent as one another; and traditional values are evoked together with the quest for truth and individual rights. Moreover, three typologies of Internet users (proactive, ambivalent, and follower), which were identified on the basis of the quality of their online interactions, show different patterns of emotions and values. We may thus conclude that alternative ways of constructing self-other and self-society relationships currently coexist in China and that these alternative views confront each other on BBS forums.

Key words
bi-cultural self, bulletin board system, China, content analysis, online interactions, social representations.

Introduction

Since the mid 1990s, there has been an enormous increase in Internet usage in China. Bulletin board systems (BBSs), also known as online forums, where massive numbers of users share information and life experiences, and discuss news and hot topics, are a major type of online public sphere in China (Yang, 2003). Unlike other id-centric social network sites, BBSs also provide researchers with an ideal opportunity to study how Chinese behave and express their emotions toward public and social issues online. Chinese BBSs attract almost one-third of Chinese Internet users (38.8% of Internet users used BBSs in 2008, 30.7% in 2009, 30.7% in 2010, data from the annual report of China Internet Network Information Center, 2010).

Each of the top BBS forums in China gathers dozens/hundreds of discussion boards which contain thousands if not millions of threads (that consist of a root post and corresponding replies) which are changing all the time (Yang, Le & An, 2009).

BBSs provide a public place where Internet users can carry out public dialogue and discussions, learn to communicate with strangers and build weak ties. As a result, BBSs have had a profound influence on Chinese society, as they not only prompt political engagement and challenge traditional social or cultural ideologies, but also create spaces that nourish civility and social bonding (Damm, 2007; Yang, 2003; Ye, Sarrica & Fortunati, forthcoming).

For these reasons we have identified BBSs forums as an ideal place to examine the shaping of opposed cultural orientations in a nation – China – that is changing at a fast pace and facing a quick shift from a traditional into a more fragmented society (Dioale & Seda, 2001; Lu, 1997; Ng, Phillips & Lee, 2002; Tsui & Rich, 2002). This is a very relevant issue since, as Riesman (1961) wrote, each society builds the social character it needs. Our investigations draw on the development of what this scholar called social character, and in particular on the bi-cultural self model (Lu, 2008; Lu, Kao, Chang,Wu&Jin, 2008). On the basis of this model, we assume that opposite cultural orientations currently coexist in China. This is not surprising if one thinks of the very rapid shift of Chinese society from Maoism to Communist capitalism, and then to the Economic Reform.

Hence we hypothesize that a twofold self-construal corresponding to an individual- and social-oriented self is emerging in China and that its formation can be detected (also) in the way Chinese people debate about social and political issues (Oyserman & Markus, 1998) online. Before presenting our research, the bi-cultural self model and the social representations approach to self-construal are briefly discussed (see Fig. 1).

Cultural world view		Individualism	Collectivism
	Goals	Priority of personal goals	Priority of group goals
	Behaviours	Guided by attitudes	Guided by norms
	Interaction	Exchange relationships	Communal relationships
	Values	Openness to change (e.g. Power, Hedonism, Achievement, Self-enhancement)	Conservatism (e.g. Benevolence, Tradition)
		Social representations of selfhood elaborated in the two cultural contexts	
Self		**Individual-oriented**	**Social-oriented**
	Definition	Bounded	Relational
	Structure	Unique, stable	Flexible, fluid
	Relevant characteristic	Internal, personal capacities, attitudes, motivations	External, status, role relationships
	Goals	Self-realisation Direct expression of self	Group belonging Adaptation Moral improvement Self-cultivation for ideal society
	Emotions	Ego-focussed (e.g. frustration, anger)	Other-focussed (e.g. shame, sympathy)

Figure 1 Cultural orientation and corresponding social representations of selfhood (adapted from Lu, 2008; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oishi, Schimmack, Diener & Suh, 1998; Oyserman & Markus, 1998; Triandis, 1993).

Then a content analysis of the two largest Chinese BBS forums is presented; we identify three different typologies of Internet users that we define as proactive, ambivalent, or followers, and we describe how these three groups manifest different interpersonal relationships, emotions, and values. Results support the expected coexistence of different types of self-construal in contemporary China.

The bi-cultural self model

The bi-cultural self model refines the classical *independentinterdependent* self model and contributes to the psychosocial interpretation of the features that characterize contemporary China (Lu, 2008). This model is rooted in the distinction between independent and interdependent selfconstrual, also defined by Riesman as self-direct and hetero-direct self, and by Elias (1987) as I-identity and we-identity, where the former is characterized by attributes, abilities, traits, desires, and motives that are 'individual property', while the latter tends to include others, because relations with others are the defining features of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Bearing in mind that the formation of the socio-cultural identity is a process, the bi-cultural self model distinguishes between an individualoriented and a social-oriented self. The individual-oriented self largely overlaps with *Western*, *independent*, *idiocentric* orientations, that is, a bounded self, characterized by autonomy, internal coherence, independence, and by the striving for self-actualization and the expression of one's own potentialities, rights, and capacities. The individualoriented self correlates with measures of cognitive orientation, motivations, and emotions in a way that mirrors the independent self: it is associated with motivations for individual achievement, individual well-being, and independence.

It also correlates with self-focused emotions such as frustration, anger, feelings of positive self-evaluation, and pride; these are emotions that have the *individual* internal state as the main referent and that emerge from fulfilling or blocking personal goals and expectations (Lu, 2008; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The social-oriented self is a refinement of Markus and Kitayama's *interdependent* self which is characterized by flexible boundaries, interdependence, flexibility, and the ability to restrain one's own expectations. The socialoriented self adds two more features: the *relational* nature of the self and its *moral tension*.

The model encompasses three levels of relationship: self–other relationship, self– group relationship, and self–society relationship. At each of the three levels, traditional Chinese culture fosters respectively communal orientation and sensitivity to others, in-group integration and superiority of group goals, and rules, norms, and situational sensitivity. Moreover, the traditional social-oriented self, especially in the Confucian heritage, is characterized by an emphasis on moral and spiritual tension which emerges in respect of roles, status, commitments, and responsibilities. The traditional Chinese self, in fact, is conceived as a tool for realizing an ideal society, and in this context internalized moral norms, and the striving for unity between the self and society via selfcultivation, self-control, and self-transcendence are at the core of its essence. The social-oriented self is thus associated with communal orientation, inclusion of other in the self, belief in harmony, and holistic thinking. With regard to emotion, the social-oriented self measure correlates with otherfocused emotions such as shame, guilt, sympathy, respect, and feelings of communion – emotions that have *the other* as the main referent and that require, in fact, the assumption of others' perspectives and sensitivity to their requests and expectations (Lu, 2008; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

According to Lu and Yang (2006), the bi-cultural self model is particularly relevant in contemporary China because it helps to 'explore a phenomenon that is scarcely noticed byWestern mainstream psychology but nonetheless [is] vitally meaningful for the vast population of people living in the non-West developing world, such as the Chinese; that is, the possibility of a traditional-modern bicultural self among the presumed "monoculturals" ' (p. 167). As already suggested by Markus and Kitayama, multiple selves are available to individuals; as such, the individual may be characterized by different levels of endorsement of the individual-oriented and social-oriented self. In particular, the neglected individual self might be emphasized in specific domains of life such as work, whereas the social self might be central in guiding family relationships. At the societal level, the composite self 'can also be seen as a bi-cultural self encompassing traditional Chinese cultural rudiments and modern Western cultural rudiments' (Lu & Yang, 2006, p. 169). Hence, the mix between modern and traditional China seems to be at the core of the emerging bi-cultural self.

The contemporary interplay of the two selves was first observed in Taiwan (Lu & Yang, 2006) and more recently in mainland China, where the latter endorses more strongly the individual-oriented self (Lu *et al*., 2008).

However, the coexistence between the individual-oriented self and the more traditional self-construal still remains under explored. The opposite phenomenon also remains unexplored, that is, the recent influence of the socialoriented self in the West, which takes the form of the great importance people now attribute to their visibility (think, for example, of social network sites). As Berkeley (1710) argued, being is as such because the individual is perceived by others. Thus, personal visibility becomes the proof of one's own existence. This attitude also introduces into Western society a new situation that Riesman (1961) conceptualized as the shift from the self-direct self to the hetero-direct self. Further proof of this is the great value attributed to individuals' reputation online that echoes the insatiable need for approval that today distinguishes the hetero-direct selves of the middle to upper classes in the West as well as in the East.

Self-construal as social representations

In order to interpret the interplay between societal changes and self construction, Oyserman and Markus (1998) proposed considering interdependent or independent selves as social representations of selfhood which are elaborated within collectivist or individualistic cultures.

For Oyserman and Markus (1998), the self is the primary object of social construction, and social representations provide the scaffolding for its construction *in* the culture:

'Social representations provide the form and the language for the "who am I" or "who are we" questions, and in so doing structure the nature of the "right" answer' (p. 108).

In other words, independent/interdependent selves and individualistic/collectivist cultures, along with idiosyncratic experiences, emerge from individual positioning within the ever-changing cultural and social context. In a nutshell (Gelfand *et al*., 2001), individualism stresses values such as power and independence, functional relationships, self-reliance, and more direct and straightforward conflicting behaviours. Within this world view, the nature of personhood is socially constructed around an ideal of independence, a separate identity that is supposed to express its interests and goals independently from the group. Collectivism, on the other hand, is characterized by values such as tradition, security, and conformity, and it promotes interdependence, indirect ways of managing disputes, and avoidance of conflicts in order to preserve group integrity.

In this world view culture, the group is the basic unit of survival; the self is expected to be flexible and fluid in order to attend to the needs of its group, and it is fully developed only when it has its place in the community (Oyserman & Markus, 1998).

Merging this perspective with Lu's model, in this paper we suggest that the bi-cultural self can be conceived as the expression of coexisting social representations of selfhood (Fig. 1).

China, as a consequence of globalisation and of the adoption of the market economic system, is a society under transformation and is facing the emergence of individualist values, goals, norms, and self-construal.

Hence, we hypothesize that traditional social-oriented and new individual-oriented selves will coexist and interact, shaping contemporary bi-cultural selves. Since social representations emerge through communication in the public arena, and since the self is central to other representations, in the present paper we expect that the bi-cultural self may also be found in the ways people discuss relevant social issues.

Research questions

The main aim of the present research is to explore how the content of the discussions that take place in Chinese BBS forums reflects the co-presence of both traditional and new ways of constructing self and society. To be precise, we expect to find bi-cultural self-characteristics in respect of three relevant features: behaviour, emotion, and values.

With regard to behaviour, which is identified here with how online interactions are managed, we expect to identify ways of managing relationships related to social-oriented self-construal (e.g. supportive, relational styles) *coexisting with* strategies related to individual-oriented self-construal (e.g. self-expression, exchange-based relations).

With regard to emotion, we expect to identify content related to other-focused emotions *coexisting with* content related to ego-focussed emotions. As for values, we expect to find content that stresses the importance of common values such as tradition and conformity and the importance of moral improvement and self-cultivation, *coexisting with* content related to individualistic values such as power, independence, and self-enhancement.

Finally, we hypothesize that the three examined features, i.e. interaction, emotions, and values, give shape to two main patterns that correspond to the individual- or socialoriented self.

Sample and methodology

Sampling process

The sampling is the result of a multi-stage process. From the list of Chinese BBSs Top 1001 and the Top Chinese Forums, 2 and based on the topics discussed in the forums and the ID information pages, we chose two major Chinese BBS forums: Tian Ya and Feng Huang. Both forums are comprehensive online communities containing different discussion boards. We chose these popular discussion boards, which focus on political and social issues, as our sample population of messages: 'Tian Ya – GuanTian Tea House'3 and 'Feng Huang – Debate'4. Generally speaking, the first page of a discussion board contains both the most popular issues and the highest number of replies and browses in a day. We sampled the first pages of the two discussion boards ('Tea House' and 'Debate') at 9 pm every other day from 1 November 2009 to 30 November 2009.5

In accordance with the systematic sampling method (Ke, Huang & Xie, 2005; Kish, 1965), we decided to sample 15 threads from the first pages of 'Tea House' and 'Debate' respectively. The systematic sampling at the second stage yielded 450 threads (15 days, 15 threads per day, two forums) with 68 645 messages (52 226 from 'Tea House' and 16 419 from 'Debate') in total. This still meant a massive amount of data. Thus, another random sampling stage (the third stage) was taken in order to achieve a workable sample. According to the random numbers as the sequence of the message, we got our final sample which consisted of 6109 messages.

Participants in the online forums rarely declare their gender or age. In our sample, 57.9% of participants declared being men, 5.1% being women, and the gender of the remaining 37% of authors is unknown. Two percent of participants declared that they were less than 24 years old, 7.4% declared being older than 51, 21.4% were adults (25–50), and the age of the remaining 69.2% is unknown. Finally, only six persons (0.1%) explicitly declared being from rural areas, while 33.4% declared being from urban areas. This means that we don't have demographic information with regard to the majority of participants. One last relevant element that describes our sample is the number of posts written by each person, which varies from 219 messages to a single message. The overall pattern of participation rates shows a distribution that is different from the one usually observed in Western countries.

Content analysis

The messages were subjected to quantitative content analysis. A grid was used, comprising 69 questions which can be categorized into three parts: ID information, message content, and emotion and language of the message. Due to language difficulties, the analysis was conducted by the first author, a Chinese native speaker, yet the use of this analysis grid was continually renegotiated during its application in order to detect the most possible information from the messages analysed (Losito, 1993). In order to check for coding reliability, a sample of messages was further analyzed by two independent judges.With 95% confidence level and 5% confidence interval, we extracted 362 sample messages from the 6109 population. Then we invited an Internet user and a graduate student in sociology to do the coding according to our grid. Eighty-eight percent of the results coincide with our coding results. This is a good level of inter-judge reliability, especially if we consider that one of the blind judges was an Internet user with no previous theoretical competence in the field. In the present paper we will concentrate on data emerging from the following issues: motives that push individuals to take part in online discussions, online interactions, emotions, and values.

Results

The twofold self and online interaction

In order to explore how the twofold self-construal emerges in online interaction, messages were coded on a five-point scale, ranging from a very proactive content (i.e. messages that propose new issues, new questions) to very acquiescent (i.e. messages that follow the discussion, that try to understand and join others' problems). The mean score (M = 3.16, *SD* = 0.94) is significantly different from the middle point 3 (t(6619) = 14.09, $p < 0.001$), thus showing that the messages tend be slightly acquiescent. Considering that the proactive or acquiescent content referred to specific tendencies expressed by users, we decided to identify different typologies of Internet users on the basis of the typologies of their messages. For each BBS user (identified by his/her ID), the mean score of the proactive-acquiescent evaluation of his/her messages was computed. Individual mean score ranges from 1 (44 subjects had this score), in this case the messages posted were very proactive, to 5 (212 subjects had this score), in this case the messages posted were very acquiescent. On the basis of the overall distribution of individual scores, three typologies of Internet users were defined: proactive (*N* = 2141, whose mean score was less than 3.00), ambivalent (*N* = 2310, whose mean score was between 3.00 and 3.36), and follower (*N* = 2243, whose mean score was more than 3.36). This typology was entered in the following analyses in order to examine whether the three different behaviours also correspond to different emotions and values.

The twofold self and emotion

The quality of online interaction was coded across six emotional dimensions (Table 1). Our messages were, overall, polemic and cold, slightly aggressive, strong, impolite, and serious.
An analysis of variance with a Scheffé post-hoc test shows significant differences ($p < 0.01$) in all the dimensions between proactive, ambivalent, and follower participants (Table 1); F values for the six dimensions are respectively $F(2, 6617) = 224.6$; $F(2, 6617) = 638.5$; $F(2, 6617) = 51.7$; $F(2, 6617) = 405.1$; $F(2, 6617) = 123.4$; $F(2, 6617) = 90.5$).
Proactive participants showed a more direct and straightforward approach, and their messages were more strong, polemic and serious than the ones posted by followers and ambivalent participants. Messages by proactive participants were also quite aggressive and cold, that is, more focused on data and goals. Followers, instead, gave more attention to the quality of interpersonal relationships, with milder, weaker, more conciliatory, and warmer messages. Messages posted by ambivalent participants were, conversely, the most aggressive, impolite, ironic, and cold. Further investigations are needed to verify whether participants that we coded as ambivalent may represent a third, emerging, cultural orientation which is now indefinite and thus extraneous.

Passing now to emotion, our data, as expected, shows the co-presence of ego-focused and other-focused emotions (Table 2). The two most frequently evoked emotions are a sense of ridicule and a feeling of calm (Table 2), two culturally situated emotions, the meanings of which probably need some explanation. With regard to ridicule, this emotion is the one evoked by netizens teasing, deriding, and making fun of (by means of verbal jokes, pictures modified with Photoshop, or parodies) people who are rich, in authority, or false, as well as events which netizens feel unsatisfied with because they are untrue. Oppressed by a strict censorship, netizens create lots of 'language tricks' to protect their messages and their accounts from being deleted. By using expressions with double meaning, homophone, or Chinese Pinyin and English abbreviations, the posts survive. On the other hand, the audiences have great fun when speculating about what the real meaning of those 'language tricks' is. Because of these 'language tricks', the messages stir up a sense of ridicule. As for the second most frequent emotion we detected, calmness, its interpretation goes back to the fact that Chinese people are profoundly influenced by Confucian philosophy.

The Doctrine of the Mean (Chinese: □□; Zhong Yong), which was integrated into the public education system well before the 20th century, is a key principle in Chinese culture.

Being without inclination to either side is called 'Zhong'; admitting no change is called 'Yong'. The goal of 'being on the mean' is to maintain balance and harmony by directing the mind to a state of constant equilibrium. In the online discussion boards, detachment and restraint are found in dealing with contemporary life events.

Table 1 Online interaction. Comparison between proactive, ambivalent, and follower participants

	Aggressive–Mild	Strong–Weak	Polite–Impolite	Polemic–Conciliatory	Ironic–Serious	Warm–Cold
Proactive	2.79[b]	2.38[a]	3.07[a]	1.84[a]	3.16[c]	3.59[b]
Ambivalent	2.57[a]	2.69[b]	3.28[b]	1.95[b]	2.59[a]	3.69[c]
Follower	3.25[c]	3.37[c]	3.04[a]	2.45[c]	2.76[b]	3.33[a]
Total	2.87	2.82	3.13	2.08	2.83	3.53

Note: Measures were rated on a five-point scale ranging, e.g. in the first column, from 1 = very aggressive to 5 = very mild. Apex letters indicate significant differences between group means (Scheffé post-hoc).

Table 2 Frequencies and percentages of emotions by typology

Ego-focused			Other-focused		
	Frequency	Valid percent		Frequency	Valid percent
Calm	1442	25.3	Ridicule	2022	35.5
Anger	933	16.4	Openness to other	768	13.5
Regret	203	3.6	Compassion	59	1.0
Sadness	141	2.5			
Helplessness	88	1.5			
Fear	21	0.4			
Happiness	15	0.3			
Boredom	4	0.1			

Table 3 Typology of emotions by typology of Internet users; numbers in cells are percentages

Ego-focused				Other-focused			
	Proactive	Ambivalent	Follower		Proactive	Ambivalent	Follower
Calm	36.1[a]	24.4[b]	39.5[a]	Ridicule	20.7[b]	45.3[a]	34.1[b]
Anger	39.3[a]	36.3	24.3[b]	Openness to other	21.0[b]	24.2[b]	54.8[a]
Regret	37.4[a]	35.0	27.6[b]	Compassion	50.8[a]	35.6	13.6[b]
Sadness	40.4[a]	20.6[b]	39.0				
Helplessness	38.6	37.5	23.4[b]				
Fear	42.9	47.6	9.5[b]				
Happiness	20.0	20.0	60.0				
Boredom	25.0	25.0	50.0				

Note: Apex letters indicate significant differences (adjusted standardized residuals): [a] indicates that the number of cases in that cell is significantly larger than would be expected; [b] indicates that the number of cases in that cell is significantly smaller than would be expected.

Ridicule is a kind of other-focused emotion, while calm is an ego-focused one. The co-presence of ego-focused and other-focused emotions is also shown by feelings such as regret, sadness, and happiness on the one hand, and openness to the other and compassion on the other. It is interesting to note that both ego- and other-focused feelings are positive or negative and require different levels of arousal (Table 2). These emotions were further analyzed in the light of the three main behavioural characteristics of online interaction outlined before: proactive, followers, and ambivalent. Proactive, ambivalent, and follower participants show ego-focused and other-focused emotions with different frequency (Table 3).

As expected, proactive participants evoke ego-focused emotions such as anger, regret, and sadness more frequently, while followers refer significantly less often to these emotions. Followers, however, evoke emotions linked to openness-to-other significantly more often than other participants.

Three unanticipated results can be underlined. Calm is evoked by both proactive and follower participants more often than expected; this may be due to the particular nature of this emotion which is ego-focused as well as rooted in traditional culture. Compassion is evoked by proactive participants more often than expected and by followers less often than expected. These results will be further explored as this other-focused emotion (compassion) expresses a mix of positive self-differentiation from disadvantaged others and an emotional communion with his/her sorrow. Ridicule is evoked by ambivalent participants more often than expected; this suggests that the attention of ambivalent participants might be focused on the comparison between individual choices and behaviours and group expectations. The absence of a significant difference for happiness and boredom is linked to the low frequency of these emotions in the two groups.

The twofold self and the values

About a third (32%) of the messages expressed some reference to values. In Table 4 we organise them into two distinct dimensions, the first referring to the social self and the second to the individual self. Also, in this case it is possible to observe how the different dimensions emerge from the data.

Table 4 Main values evoked, frequency and percentages

Communal–Relational			Trust and individual rights		
	Frequency	Valid percent		Frequency	Valid percent
Personal admiration	312	14.4	Truth	313	14.4
Social equality	218	10.0	Faith	214	9.9
Patriotism	206	9.5	People livelihood	152	7.0
Democracy	201	9.3	Freedom	125	5.8
Social justice	182	8.4	Honesty	95	4.4
Public welfare	94	4.3	Human rights	60	2.8

Table 5 Main values evoked by typologies of Internet users; numbers in cells are percentages

Communal–Relational				Trust and individual rights			
	Proactive	Ambivalent	Follower		Proactive	Ambivalent	Follower
Personal admiration	43.6	38.1	18.3	Truth	33.5[b]	46.0[a]	20.4
Social equality	32.6[b]	50.9[a]	16.5	Faith	65.0[a]	23.8[b]	11.2[b]
Patriotism	48.5	27.7[b]	23.8[a]	People livelihood	55.9[a]	28.9	15.1
Democracy	51.7	34.8	13.4[b]	Freedom	42.4	43.2[a]	14.4
Social justice	75.3[a]	19.2[b]	5.5[b]	Honesty	49.5	30.5	20.0
Public welfare	7.4[b]	24.5[b]	68.1[a]	Human rights	46.7	33.3	20.0

Note: Apex letters indicate significant differences (adjusted standardized residuals): [a] indicates that the number of cases in that cell is significantly larger than would be expected; [b] indicates that the number of cases in that cell is significantly smaller than would be expected.

Part of our sample refers to traditional values that stress communal orientation and a moral tension rooted in the respect of roles, status, and public responsibilities, such as personal admiration, faith, patriotism, and public welfare. Democracy, social equality, and social justice can be considered communal values as, in the Chinese context we examined, they represent goals to be achieved by the whole society, rather than the recognition of individual rights. Other respondents highlight trust, which is a critical issue in contemporary China, and values such as faith and honesty, which can be interpreted as a quest for interpersonal relationships based on individual morality rather than on family or group bonds.
In the same vein, the quest for truth is often related to the search for and use of objective information (such as scientific data).

Other messages refer to rights and to the quest for individual mobility within the society; values such as people livelihood, freedom, and human rights will be interpreted in this perspective. The cross tabulation between values and typologies of Internet users is reported in Table 5. The analysis of adjusted standardized residuals identifies interesting overand under-representations in several cells. Social justice and the quest for trustworthy relationships and enhancement of individual life are over-reported by proactive users. Social equality, freedom, and the search for objective information are evoked by ambivalent users. Followers are instead more interested in traditional values such as patriotism and public welfare.

But how is the twofold self revealed in the messages of these two BBS forums? To investigate this we carried out a cross tabulation between values and emotions evoked by the participants in the forums. This shows an interesting intertwining between communal- and individualoriented values and ego-focused or other-focused emotions (Table 6).

Ridicule and calm, the two most frequently evoked emotions, and the two sides of traditional orientations towards other and self are significantly more reported when the discussion deals with honesty, truth, and faith, that is, when discussing redefinition of morality. Ridicule is also significantly associated with the main communal value, which is social equality: Chinese netizens frequently make sarcastic comments about social inequalities such as urban-rural inequality and officials-citizens inequality. Openness to the other, another other-oriented emotion, is also significantly associated with the communal values of personal admiration and public welfare. Ego-focused emotions tend to be significantly associated with individual rights (as we would expect) and a quest for change. Some exceptions and specificities would require further investigation. Unexpected results are, for example, the association of patriotism with fear and anger, as well as the significant association that is observed between sadness and the quest for social justice and human rights, especially if compared with the intersection between happiness and democracy (even if these associations might suffer from low frequencies).

Table 6 Values by emotions

		Ridicule	Calm	Openness to other	Fear	Anger	Helplessness	Sadness	Compassion	Regret	Boredom	Happiness
Social equality	Freq.	70	39	0	1	56	7	5	5	7	0	0
	Adj. Res.	2.32	−0.12	−4.70	−0.14	1.03	1.71	−0.67	0.55	−1.07	−0.51	−0.62
Honesty	Freq.	36	25	2	0	21	0	3	0	1	1	0
	Adj. Res.	2.30	1.73	−2.36	−0.75	−0.61	−1.40	−0.06	−1.42	−1.82	2.81	−0.41
Truth	Freq.	99	88	10	0	46	1	2	2	12	0	1
	Adj. Res.	3.21	5.57	−3.33	−1.37	−3.49	−2.06	−2.60	−1.63	−0.58	−0.61	0.84
Faith	Freq.	21	25	9	1	11	0	2	2	1	0	0
	Adj. Res.	−0.08	2.96	0.94	0.89	−2.18	−1.25	−0.33	0.41	−1.52	−0.30	−0.37
Personal admiration	Freq.	65	28	33	0	42	1	1	1	11	0	0
	Adj. Res.	1.91	−1.92	4.31	−1.11	−1.07	−1.51	−2.28	−1.54	0.45	−0.50	−0.61
Public welfare	Freq.	6	10	70	0	2	0	3	0	2	0	0
	Adj. Res.	−5.03	−2.47	22.47	−0.77	−5.45	−1.43	−0.14	−1.45	−1.41	−0.34	−0.42
Patriotism	Freq.	35	27	6	3	57	2	2	2	10	0	0
	Adj. Res.	−1.46	−0.65	−2.23	2.41	3.77	−0.58	−1.43	−0.62	0.90	−0.43	−0.53
Social justice	Freq.	19	22	0	1	92	9	12	10	8	0	0
	Adj. Res.	−5.67	−2.78	−4.46	−0.04	8.46	3.11	2.63	3.57	−0.44	−0.48	−0.59
People livelihood	Freq.	43	19	2	2	33	10	12	6	9	0	0
	Adj. Res.	0.54	−2.06	−3.29	1.37	−0.58	4.58	3.55	1.97	0.70	−0.42	−0.52
Human rights	Freq.	15	8	1	1	15	0	5	2	2	0	0
	Adj. Res.	0.16	−0.79	−1.78	1.33	0.69	−1.02	2.61	0.98	−0.40	−0.25	−0.30
Freedom	Freq.	34	18	6	0	21	1	2	5	14	1	0
	Adj. Res.	0.85	−0.82	−1.24	−0.81	−1.37	−0.78	−0.86	2.04	3.89	2.59	−0.44
Democracy	Freq.	51	39	17	1	44	3	9	0	12	0	2
	Adj. Res.	−0.29	0.37	0.10	−0.07	−0.53	−0.35	1.22	−2.07	0.89	−0.49	3.15

Note: Cells highlighted in grey indicate that the number of cases in that cell is significantly larger than would be expected (adjusted standardized residuals).

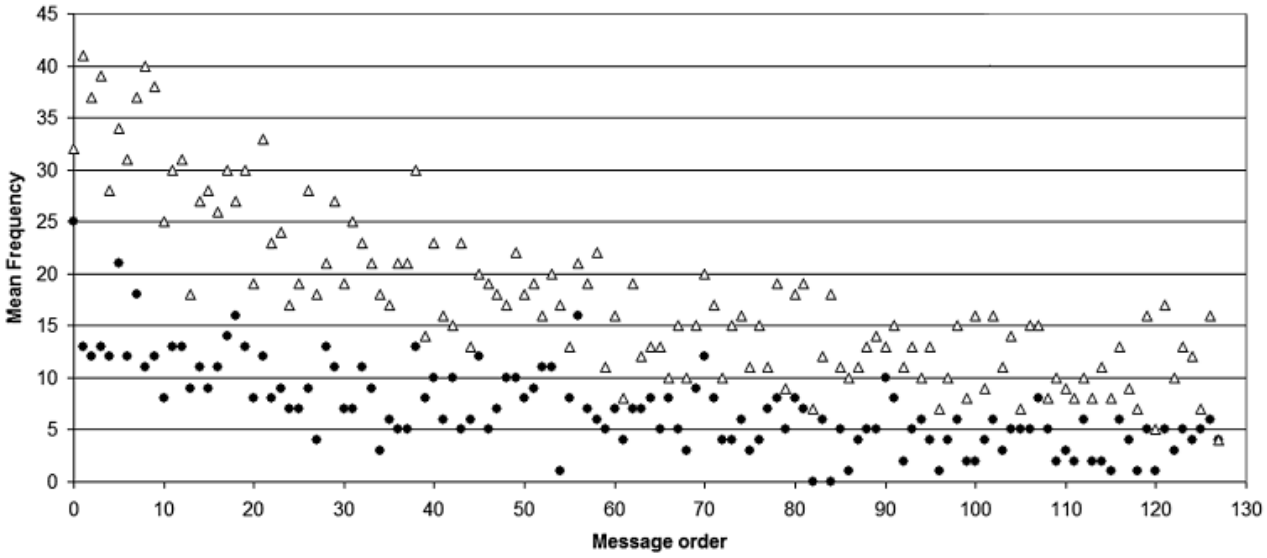

Figure 2 Mean frequencies of evocation of emotions and values by message order. Note: Messages range from 0 = root message to 127 = the most distant message considered in the selected sample. —●—, values; —△—, emotions.

The dynamic of coexistence:

Preliminary cues

Do different values and emotions remain visible from the beginning to the end of the conversations or do netizens converge towards shared positions? Does the content of the discussion make more salient different selves? In other words, do social and individual orientations coexist, do they mix into a new orientation, or does one of the orientations prevail over the other? In order to give a preliminary answer to these questions, the messages were ordered (from 0 = root post to *n* = last post), and the cross tabulation between emotions and message order and between values and message order was then explored. The first messages of each thread present a greater amount of emotions and values than the last messages of the discussion (Fig. 2).

With regard to emotions, the number of references decreases from a mean of 28.3 (*DS* = 7.0) in the first 30 messages to a mean of 11 (*DS* = 3.5) in the last 30.With regard to values, the number of references also decreases from a mean of 11.6 (*DS* = 4.2) in the first 30 messages to a mean of 4 (*DS* = 1.9) in the last 30. Apart from the observed general decrease, frequencies (results are untabulated in the interest of saving space) do not indicate evident convergence toward a single set of emotions or values. Both ego-focused and other-focused emotions such as anger, calm, or ridicule are evoked by participants from the start to the end of the discussions. Similarly, communal–relational values as well as references to trust and individual rights are present throughout the online debates. This preliminary exploration suggests that individual-oriented and social-oriented features coexist in the discussions.

We further examined if the salience of communal or individualistic orientation was related with the main issues debated in each thread. The cross-tabulation between values, emotions, and main issues, and the analysis of adjusted standardized residuals, suggest again that the two orientations coexist (untabulated results for space reasons). For example, issues related to economy evoke happiness and openness to other more than other issues. Political issues are significantly associated with anger, sadness, and ridicule, and patriotic issues are associated with helplessness, calm, and compassion.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented exploratory content analyses of two of the main Chinese BBS forums with the purpose of investigating how bi-cultural selves are currently emerging in China (Lu, 2008; Lu *et al*., 2008). Chinese BBS forums are ideal places, as media studies suggest, to explore the quick societal transformations happening in China (Dioale & Seda, 2001; Lu, 1997; Ng *et al*., 2002; Tsui & Rich, 2002). Merging these strands of research, we hypothesized that the online debates may represent a good observatory for detecting the co-presence of social-oriented and individual-oriented self-construal.

We chose to limit our content analysis to three of the main features suggested by cross-cultural research: interaction, emotions, and values. Moreover, we explored how the emergence of the individual- and social-oriented selves is also linked with different online behaviours: proactive, ambivalent, or follower. Results partially support our expectations, yet their complexity requires further in-depth investigation.

Our data show that bi-cultural self features are jointly present in online debates: direct expressions, which result in more polemic and stronger content, coexist with conciliatory content; ego-focused and other-focused emotions are almost equally frequent; traditional values are evoked together with the quest for truth and individual rights.

When we looked at the dynamic of the threads, we did not observe a clear convergence toward a prevalent selfhood, or exclusive relationships between the issues debated and social or individual orientations. We may thus conclude that alternative ways of constructing self-other and selfsociety relationships currently coexist in China and that these alternative views confront each other on BBS forums. In other words, our results support Oyserman and Markus's view (1998) that public discussions and communication contribute to redefining the social representations of selfhood. Our investigation suggests that online forums, which are at the forefront of public debate, may represent places of particular interest for understanding and foreseeing the emergence of new, multifaceted selves in China.

Moreover, this twofold self which is emerging in China also expresses itself in the three main typologies of BBS users: proactive, ambivalent, and followers. Proactive participants show a more direct and straightforward approach: they are more task-oriented, more focused on individual emotions, and on the quest for individual rights and selfenhancement.

Followers, on the other hand, are more relationship-oriented, tend to participate in online debates with more conciliatory and warm messages, and express openness to others and traditional values. It seems that the two approaches to BBS forums reflect two opposite cultural orientations. However, we also noticed the presence of ambivalent users, who tend to use a mix of proactive and relationship-oriented approaches. Further investigations are needed to address specifically the emergence of ambivalent users, whose messages are currently perceived as being more aggressive, impolite, and cold.

Moreover, a more profound and articulated analysis should be done to explore how the social dynamics of individual 'multiple selves' expresses online. Multiple selves coexist within each individual and are expressed depending on salient social roles as well as on the perspective taken by the actor. For example, it is not unusual to observe participants (e.g. ID: RSS) who shift between ego-focused stances (e.g. 'with the help from property management company, I pay for the heating fees') and the quest for traditional values (e.g. 'For now in China there are rarely traditional values left, as well as no bottom lines for the people'). Individual-level analyses are thus needed to investigate the interplay of multiple selves.

Finally, our data highlight the presence of cultural specificities that cannot simply be reduced to the individualism-collectivism dimension. Feelings such as ridicule and calm, the compassion expressed by proactive participants, as well as the observed correlations between emotions and values point the way to further investigation that will take into account cultural specificities together with the peculiarities of Chinese online forums.

An example of this specificity is represented by human flesh search, a primarily Chinese Internet phenomenon involving massive research using Internet media. Its purpose is to identify corrupt public officials and expose them to public humiliation, merging the potentiality of the new media for other-focused emotions such as ridicule with quests for justice and individual responsibility.

In this regard, our data suggest that the comparison between individual behaviours and group expectations might be typical of what we consider ambivalent participants, neither totally selforiented nor totally embedded in traditional self-other relationships. In conclusion, further research is needed to scrutinize these first exploratory results; in particular, further investigation should address cultural specificities of the Chinese population.

Our data provided no opportunity to identify the location of the netizens; it is possible to hypothesize that participants from the cities and from the countryside may express different views, thus reproducing online a cultural conflict between more 'advanced' and more rural areas. Another limitation of the present research is its lack of temporal dimensionality. Descriptive results show that a mix of emotions and values is present from the first message to the end of each thread. However our analyses were not focused on the way different positions confront in the discussion and new meanings are negotiated.

A deeper and fine-grained analysis of conversational exchanges and discursive processes is hence needed to understand how the online debate evolves and if and how new cultural nuances are negotiated in BBSs. For example, the coexistence of feelings of ridicule with anger and calm, in the very specific context that is the Chinese web space, suggests that irony could help Internet users not only maintain, strengthen, and sanction a particular view of who is 'elite', who is 'grassroots', and how they should behave towards one another, but also to develop their social capital and social networks online.

Further investigations are necessary to monitor the evolution of online debates in BBSs so as to grasp the ongoing process through which new cultural orientations and new selves are currently emerging in the transitional phase faced by Chinese society.

End notes

1. Ifeng.com. Chinese BBS Top 100: http://bbs.ifeng.com/zhuanti/bbstop100/. Published by ifeng.com.

2. DaQi. Top Chinese Forums: http://top.daqi.com/paihang.html. Published by DaQi.com, which is the first media platform to study and practise the aggregation of social media resources in China.

3. Tian Ya – GuanTian Tea House: http://bbs.tianya.cn/list-no01-1.shtml.

4. Feng Huang – Debate: http://bbs.ifeng.com/forumdisplay.php?fid=158.

5. The rush hours for the online BBS forums are roughly from 8 pm to 11 pm in China. So we deliberately chose 9 pm as the time slot for data collection. We chose this period (1 November to 30 November) because there were no significant festivals, holidays, or memorial days in China. Without any special political or social events suddenly happening, this should reflect the usual ecology of Internet forums.

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