Preface

The ideas for this book arose from many sources: they stem directly from my decade-long interest and academic research in the areas of new media technology and communication, specifically the Chinese Internet; the large number of graduate students of mine who are very enthusiastic about anything that could be termed “mobile”, “social media” and “connected;” and, based on the collaboration and research by Dr. Peter Jakubowicz, whose timely doctoral dissertation on “The Dynamics of Digital Interaction” was the impetus for some of the main points in this book. In particular, the initial research interest was aroused by a class presentation in one of my guest lectures in Tsinghua University at the end of 2008. Ms. Cao Chengyu, then a Year 4 student, disclosed something called “Internet pushing hands,” which was so unusual, absurd and at the same time fascinating that it immediately inspired me to engage in a series of research efforts in this field. The findings uncovered a peculiar phenomenon on the Internet in China which challenges the common perception of the new media environment as a cyberspace of individual netizens.

The key concept that runs through the book is, “Internet pushing hands” and the book describes a number of well-known “Internet pushing hands” cases in China. As defined in the book, the term, “Internet pushing hand (wangluo tuishou) is a colloquial term that refers to a certain type of organized business operation which uses individuals who are paid on a “per-post-basis.” These posters take on multiple online identities and launch promotional and marketing campaigns on the Internet. Their posts are widely disseminated in Internet forums, micro blogs and social networking sites (SNS). In this book, the term “Internet mercenaries” is used to describe this particular practice of public relations in China and Internet marketing strategies. It is used interchangeably with the term “Internet pushing hands.”

This book is the first academic investigation of the Chinese pushing hand operation from the conceptual perspective of communication and viral marketing. The study is based on a number of research projects in the industry conducted between 2009 and 2011. A wide variety of research methods were employed including case studies, ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, content and textual analysis, and media reviews. The readers of this book should note that the focus is mainly on the operational model of Internet mercenary marketing (e.g. how the business is organized, coordinated and implemented), and, as such, it does not cover the business model of pushing hand practice from the perspective of costs and profits.
The book is organized in 10 chapters. Chapter 1 begins by giving readers an introduction into the world of Internet mercenaries. Setting the scene by introducing “Obama girl” who was present at American President Barack Obama’s speech in Shanghai in 2009, the chapter describes how she became a hot media “star” and representative of one of the many cases of “Internet pushing hands.” We define “Internet mercenaries” and clarify key terms such as “pushing hands” and “water army.” Then the key attributes of “Internet mercenaries” are listed. The chapter ends with a consideration of some of the “legal grey areas” pertaining to internet mercenary operations and comments on the legal grey areas of this type of operation.

Chapter 2 places Internet mercenary marketing within the conceptual framework of communication and viral marketing. It provides a literature review of social media and new forms of social media facilitated marketing strategies, specifically viral marketing. It then highlights the development of social media in China with a particular emphasis on a range of various new communication applications based on Internet and wireless telecommunication technology. Social media in China provide a platform for the development of a new media environment for marketing, public relations and advertising. In addition, this chapter provides an overview on the development of social media in China – from its inception to its current state. This is followed by a detailed description of a popular form of social media -- microblogs. In the last section, some Chinese characteristics of social media marketing are briefly commented on and summarized.

Chapter 3 offers an overview of the history of Internet mercenaries in China and some of their first and best known cases. The practice of Internet pushing hands emerged in 2004-2005 involving the making of some well-known “Internet celebrities.” This chapter first documents how Internet pushing hands emerged from several separate cases, how netizens’ enthusiasm and interests evolved and how commercial business organizations were able to generate business contracts worth millions of dollars. Further in the chapter, the authors demonstrate a number of well-known cases of pushing hand operations which have been considered as classic examples of Internet mercenaries in China.

Chapter 4 illustrates in detail how the Internet mercenary operation is designed, launched and maintained. Internet mercenary operation is a well-integrated part of the Internet public relations (IPR) business. IPR in the Chinese context is defined as a series of strategic communication activities that use the Internet and other new media technologies to promote awareness and ensure a positive image of a brand, product, service or any other entity which is concerned with its public image. Specifically, this chapter details the whole procedure of Internet mercenary operations including release design, target platforms, target audience, release volume and release duration. In addition, this chapter also exhibits, in some detail, the practice of release operation, including a pyramid of “pushing hands,” and the procedures of maintenance and monitoring.

In Chapter 5, an inquiry into the principles of how organizations endeavor to develop creative messages that may contain viral qualities to stimulate their propagation in social media platforms is conducted. Internet mercenary marketing entails both precision business practice and creative
art. The operational model described in the previous chapter is mainly based on business science and IT technology which deal in such terms as mathematical calculations, categories of users, digital metrics and so on. However, there is a crucial part in the operation that involves art – the creativity to build a message that contains virusworthiness. The virusworthiness is defined as qualities in a message intended for viral marketing that is able to ignite a spontaneous transmission among individual users through the network. This chapter places the focus squarely on the process of creative design, specifically the essential issue of how a message can be created to be so compelling that it spreads like wildfire in the SNSs.

Chapter 6 evaluates the role of mainstream media in relation to the Internet-initiated pushing hand efforts. This chapter focuses on mainstream media as amplifier and how viral marketers can achieve greater social impact by carrying out IPR projects successfully integrated with a mainstream media strategy. For viral marketers to generate a greater social influence, the ultimate goal is to have their ideaviruses enter the traditional mainstream media – national or regional television networks and influential newspapers, which function as an amplifier for Internet mercenary marketing. A usual pattern is first to launch an ideavirus on the Internet, to make it brew, grow and spread along the social media networks so as to infect whoever is in its path. When it obtains a certain online “reputation,” it is a time to get the mainstream media involved. Once it is covered by the mainstream media, it would intensify the interest on the Internet in searching and sharing the story.

Chapter 7 offers a close scrutiny of how Internet mercenary practice is organized and coordinated in QQ groups, the largest social media platform in China. The authors outline in some detail how QQ groups work as an organizational platform. A significant phenomenon in Internet mercenary marketing is that a large number of these pushing hand projects are organized and coordinated through social media platforms, most significantly QQ groups. The investigation focuses in some detail on how Internet mercenary operations are organized in QQ groups where pushing hands are recruited, trained, and managed to carry out various tasks. It further elaborates on functions of the QQ platforms as well as the nature of the QQ groups in business operations. In the latter part of the chapter, a close examination of virusworthiness of messages in pushing hand tasks is provided.

In Chapter 8 some tips are offered to netizens about how to uncover pushing hand operations on the Internet. The authors suggest how individual netizens or companies can uncover “pushing hand” operations. It is vitally important that Internet users, either corporations or individuals should acquire some knowledge and skills in identifying Internet mercenary marketing schemes since unrestricted information manipulation has grown to such a large scale that it led to a media claim that 70% of visits to major sites of the Chinese Internet derived from pushing hand operations. Evaluating information and deciding whether it is in fact a genuine recommendation from netizens or managed information from pushing hands is not an easy task. This chapter provides several clues of online information evaluation.
Chapter 9 investigates the ambiguous status of Internet mercenaries in the Chinese legal system and the contradictory attitude of the Chinese government toward the industry. The authors examine the policy concerns of Internet mercenaries as they operate in a legal gray area. On the one hand, the Chinese government, although notorious for its tight control over the Internet and implementation of the “Great Firewall,” has nevertheless been quite equivocal about drawing up a clear guideline to set a legal boundary for Internet mercenary marketing and public relations. On the other hand, the government tends to resort to administrative campaigns to crack down on the so-called “illegal IPR” (IIPR), the term the government uses to refer to “pushing hand operations” when it needs to put a tight grip over these practices, rather than the enforcement of the tenet of the law on the industry. This chapter offers a review of a nation-wide, two-month campaign to crack down on IIPR in the spring of 2011 as well as an examination of the impact such administrative control has produced.

The last chapter, Chapter 10 concludes with an overview of the dilemma faced by the industry and its ambiguous future. The authors show that Internet mercenary marketing in China which has been investigated in a detailed manner throughout the book represents a unique model of integrated viral marketing strategy on the Chinese Internet. Being an indispensable part of the IPR business, the Internet mercenary strategy attests to the tenet of viral marketing by taking ingenious approaches to build up a momentum of communicative influence over social media on the Internet by managing a network of paid posters (“water army”) and a multitude of virtual personas. It is viral marketing riddled with “Chinese characteristics.”

Finally, a postscript is added just before this book was sent for printing. We’ve decided to provide additional materials to inform the reader about two of the latest developments in the Chinese landscape of social media and the Internet, namely the rise of WeChat and the newest government campaign against “Internet rumors” in 2013. WeChat, a smartphone-based mobile text and voice message communication service, has outperformed microblogs and other social media, and taken a new lead in the Chinese digital world. In the political arena, the Chinese government adopted the toughest stand in dealing with online information management manoeuvred in many cases by Internet mercenary companies in its new crackdown. Both events pose a serious challenge to Internet mercenary operations elaborated in this book. This postscript is aimed at updating the readers with the most recent developments in the Chinese Internet sphere and providing timely evaluation in regard to their impact on marketing, public relations and advertising which use Internet mercenaries.

This book is intended for a wide range of readers including scholars and students of Internet studies, researchers and practitioners of Internet PR and marketing, policy makers and Internet administrators, as well as individual users. For academics, they can gain a deeper insight into a new form of information propagation and management in the Chinese Internet and use the findings as a springboard for future research. For researchers and practitioners of PR and marketing, the book provides exemplary and comprehensive cases which illustrate various viral marketing
strategies popularly used in China. Policy makers and social media regulators can be informed of a new type of business operations which warrant a unique perspective in formulating policies and regulations related to this field. Finally, the book is for individual netizens who may find it interesting to read these pushing hand stories and become more sensitive toward information management and to some extent possible information misrepresentations on the Internet.

Of the many people who shared my research for this book, special thanks goes out to Ms. Cao Wenyuan, a MA student of mine at the University of Macau, for her excellent study of QQ Groups in Chinese Tuishou Operations. Her study helped to flesh out the parts that were not clear and also made the case studies much more relevant and timely. My thanks also goes to Ms. Kong Zifei, another MA student of mine, whose study on Chinese microblogs lent useful reference to the description of social media in the book; to Ms. Kong Weichao, Mr. Zhu Wenbo and Mr. Yao Qi, whose valuable assistance in information search, translation, graphic making, photo and reference formatting was much appreciated. I’m sincerely grateful to the Research Committee of the University of Macau for the research grant that was accorded to me over the years. Without this grant it would have been much more difficult to complete the book. In addition, my deep appreciation goes out to Dr. Peter Jakubowicz (the co-author of this book) for his insightful comments, excellent writing skills and advice on some of the chapter organizations. Finally, a big thank-you is due to the editorial team of IGI Global.

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