

In the 1980s, many Matsu people were greatly encouraged by the burgeoning Taiwanese democracy movement.<sup>1</sup> Like the Taiwanese opposition, they used publications, demonstrations, and elections (Rigger 1999: 113) to convey their dissatisfaction with military rule. The Matsu opposition movement did not end with elections, however. Dissidents sustained their efforts, and in the twenty-first century introduced new media technologies to Matsu, eventually resulting in reforms that went beyond politics. This chapter discusses how these technologies have generated *a new imaginary of Matsu* which is different from that of the military period. I show how an internet community has taken shape, in which Matsu people can break up the tightly-knit social networks on the islands to develop new online selves. While it is certainly the case that different netizens have varied ways of using internet media, within this community a special intimacy with and affect for “Matsu” are engendered and assimilated, and social actions are initiated. Internet technologies have transformed Matsu from peripheral fishing islands and a military frontline into a place with its own unique values.

### **The Matsu Democracy Movement**

The government’s guaranteed admission program laid the foundation for the Matsu Democracy Movement. As I indicated in Chapter 3, this program sent Matsu’s top students to study in Taiwan. Many of them were inspired by democratic ideas there and later led the protests for democracy in Matsu. Cao Yuanzheng is one of the pioneers in this movement among the wave of students. During his studies at a normal university in Taiwan, he was motivated by democratic ideas and came

to understand the injustices brought about by the WZA in Matsu (Y. Cao 2012). In 1983, he raised funds to establish a magazine, called *Matsu Light* (*Matsu zhi guan*), and began criticizing the WZA; he proposed holding popular elections, allowing for tourism, ending restrictions on citizens leaving the islands, and abolishing military rule, along with other important reforms. Cao later invited Liu Jiaguo, a frequent contributor to *Matsu Light*, to be the editor of the journal, and the two began to propagate democratic ideals through their publication.

Liu, who hails from Dongyin, had been sent to Taitung High School in Taiwan after elementary education, again via the guaranteed admission program. He recalled that after spending more than ten hours in turbulent waters on a ship without any problem, he got motion sickness the moment he boarded a train in Taiwan. After graduating from high school, he studied history at Soochow University in Taipei before returning to his hometown. He initially taught in a middle school before being attracted by the commercial opportunities of G. I. Joe business. Noting that Taiwanese trends were also popular in Dongyin, he opened the first café there in 1979. It was very successful, and two years later he brought the Taiwanese fad of karaoke to Dongyin. Having made quite a bit of money, he decided to expand his business and open a branch on the main island, Nangan. In 1983 he started a karaoke bar there called “Happy Island,” which was an instant success. The bar was quite a shock for Matsu citizens accustomed to the boredom of military rule. Many people—from ordinary citizens to soldiers and high-ranking military officers—became entranced by the seductive musical world of karaoke (S. Lin 2013). Within a year, five or six similar bars had opened in Nangan. Military officials soon decided that they could not allow the trend to continue, and they began to target Liu’s business.

In an interview, Liu noted that at first the county government (controlled by the military) increased his taxes tenfold, from NT\$2,000 to NT\$25,000 per month, making it nearly impossible for his business to survive. Liu then allied himself with other business owners to negotiate with the government and came to an agreement to pay NT\$5,000 monthly. Despite this, the karaoke business remained strong, so WZA officials dispatched military police to stand guard in the doorway of the

bars. This successfully prevented soldiers from going in, and his business was totally crushed. Liu said:

When that happened, I suddenly realized that there was an institution in Matsu called the “Warzone Administration.” Before that, I just felt that the hierarchical segregation between citizens and the army on the ship to Taiwan was very unfair and that the civilian militias brought us a lot of inconvenience, but this event lit the fuse that made me start to oppose the military.

After his karaoke business collapsed, Liu spent a brief period trying to run his grocery store business again before going to Taiwan to edit *Matsu Light*. As stated earlier, the journal, under the management of Cao Yuanzheng, had already begun criticizing the situation in Matsu, but because at that time it received financial support from the Matsu government, its commentary was restrained. After Liu joined the magazine, they began to raise money independently, which released them from government control and allowed them to actively promote democracy and free speech. Liu also learned how to write articles, conduct interviews, edit, and raise money, along with other skills involved in running a magazine, from the much more seasoned reporter Cao Yuanzhang, and this laid the foundation that would later help him manage the magazine on his own (J. Liu 2006b).

Liu’s experience of the military’s interference in his karaoke business may be dramatic, but such stories were by no means unusual in Matsu. As Part I of this book describes, for a long time ordinary people in Matsu were subject to strict controls imposed by the WZA. In addition to regulated travel between Matsu and Taiwan, and an enforced curfew after 9 pm each night, people’s daily lives were also severely constrained. The military often used the G. I. Joe businesses to pressure ordinary people. Many residents said that if they disobeyed the army, the authorities would threaten them by not allowing soldiers to frequent their businesses. Those who had returned after studying in Taiwan felt this especially keenly:

When we came back from Taiwan, if we kept our hair long or wore the bellbottoms that were popular in Taiwan, the police would warn us that we were “destroying customs of decency” (*pohuai shanliang fengsu*).

If we got into a fight with a soldier, they’d summarily throw us in jail for at least three days without even bothering to figure out what had happened.

Later, motorcycles came to Matsu, but there were so many rules about them. Even wearing slippers on a motorcycle would get you a fine of three hundred Taiwanese dollars.

It is unsurprising that when martial law was lifted in Taiwan in 1987 but was kept in place in Jinmen and Matsu, long-suppressed popular resentment began to erupt. Young people from Dongyin and Matsu signed petition after petition demanding the removal of the military government (J. Liu 1988). In Taiwan, Cao Yuanzhang led Liu Jiaguo and other Matsu youngsters to the streets to fight for democracy. Joining forces with protestors from Jinmen, more than 300 people went to Taipei for the “823 Jinmen-Matsu March.” They gave a full account of their situation to the Legislative Yuan (the primary legislative body in Taiwan), trying to bring an end to the WZA, to gain direct telephone access, to eliminate border exit controls, to improve public transportation, to demand a return of private lands held by the military, to lift the ban on internal travel, to hold county elections, to found a county legislative assembly, and so on. The government did respond in some ways, for example by allowing elections and establishing a county legislature. Liu Jiaguo was elected to be a county councilor (Cao Yuanzhang was later elected as a legislator). In 1991, however, President Lee Teng-hui declared the termination of “the Period of Mobilization for the Suppression of the Communist Rebellion” (*dongyuan kanluan shiqi*), and on the same day, the Ministry of Defense issued the “Proclamation of Temporary Martial Law in Jinmen-Matsu” (*jinma linshi jieyan ling*), commencing the second period of martial law in Jinmen and Matsu. Despite intense pressure from military officials, Liu Jiaguo still went to Taiwan along with two other representatives. They organized the “507 Anti-Martial Law” protest with Jinmen representatives, students and the migrants from Matsu and Jinmen living in Taiwan. A sit-in outside the main entrance of the Legislative Yuan building began on May 7 and lasted for eleven nights. The protestors left only when the Ministry of Defense agreed to end the second period of martial law in Jinmen and Matsu. On November 7 of that same year, the Ministry of Defense announced the lifting of martial law in Jinmen and Matsu, and the dismantlement of the WZA. Only then did military control over Jinmen and Matsu truly come to an end, and democracy was implemented in the region.

### *Matsu Report*

After the WZA was abolished in 1992, Cao Yuanzhang felt that his responsibilities from that era had come to an end, and he decided to close down *Matsu Light* and stand for election. In contrast, Liu Jiaguo, after having participated in protests, was keenly conscious of the important role of the media in holding the government to account and influencing society. He felt that although the WZA had finally been dismantled, Matsu's major media outlet, *Matsu Daily*, was still firmly controlled by the county government without a counterbalancing power to monitor its activities. For this reason, he founded *Matsu Report*, and proceeded with his "post WZA era" social reformation (S. Lin 2013). Worried about potential pressure from officials about what to publish, he decided not to solicit funds from the government. Instead, he raised money entirely through contributions from like-minded people. He also discovered that he was not adept at catering to the whims of voters and decided not to stand for election again, throwing himself completely into editing his biweekly broadsheet.

Given all this, *Matsu Report* held a unique position in Matsu from the very beginning. It was widely read. As one resident amusingly put it:

Everyone looked forward to the biweekly *Matsu Report*. People would often wrap their oily fried crullers in *Matsu Daily*, but if you did that with *Matsu Report*, someone would scold you! (S. Lin 2013)

Moreover, many people said: "I would read every single word of *Matsu Report*." Every time a new edition arrived, it would quickly sell out:

Every time a new edition came out, there would always be the same scene: one crowd was grabbing up *Matsu Report*, another was scrambling to read it, and the third was hotly discussing whatever topics were in the paper [Fig. 5.1]... Every edition of the paper would be read carefully, and all of the issues in it would be widely debated. The topics were varied, covering politics, local opinion, profiles, articles about art and literature, and so on. [For nearly] fourteen years, *Matsu Report* brought news and the arts to the people of Matsu, and led to many transformations in the government and the social atmosphere. (ibid.)

With so much enthusiasm for it, *Matsu Report* was published for fourteen years. By the time financial difficulties finally forced it to close



Fig. 5.1 A brand new issue of *Matsu Report* being distributed to passengers waiting at Fu'ao Wharf for a ship to Taiwan (Photo by Liu Jiaguo 1993)

its doors in 2006, Liu Jiaguo had already created the vibrant and lively forum of *Matsu Online*.

### **The Birth of *Matsu Online***

The genesis of *Matsu Online* was connected to Liu's critical stance toward the government. Around 1997, Matsu's Bureau of Education created a bulletin board system (BBS), and anyone who wanted to register to use it had to be a professional educator. Others, like Liu, could only use the site as a "guest." Liu was then banned from using the site after posting comments criticizing the county government. On being silenced by the government in this way, Liu sought out other conduits. Unfamiliar with how websites were operated, he took advantage of the online network "Hahahou" created by Chungwa Telecom, and established a discussion board called "Free Talk." By January 1999, Liu had set up a travel website, "Travels Deep in Dongyin" (*Dongyin shendu zhilu*). Two years later, *Matsu Online* formally came online on May 20, 2001. Liu recalls: "The first time we reached 500 visitors we held

a big celebration!” By November 9, 2004, the total number of hits had reached one million, and by August 2009, that number had soared to five million. During an interview around that time, I asked Liu:

So how many hits have you had at this point?

The webmaster responded: “We’ve stopped counting. We’re pretty confident in ourselves now!”

Indeed, at that point *Matsu Online* was reaching a “plateau” and the number of visitors and hits was only slowly increasing. In January 2012, there were 4,000–8,000 daily visits to the site. In April 2016, there were already 10,000 visitors. Indeed, visitors from more than 100 countries around the world had already visited *Matsu Online*. Although other websites were subsequently set up, such as *Matsu Cloud Platform* (*Matsu Yuntai Liaowangwang*) and *Matsu Voices* (*Matsu zhi Sheng*), their popularity could not compete with *Matsu Online*. For instance, a local wrote the following:

When I was wondering whether or not a flight was going to take off as scheduled, my nearly seventy-year-old mother suggested that I check *Matsu Online*. I asked my brother: “Has anything important happened lately in Matsu?” He replied: “Can’t you check for yourself on *Matsu Online*?” My sister complained that tickets to Matsu were too expensive, and my dad told her: “Write that up on *Matsu Online*.” One of my students asked me, “I heard from your assistant that you recently wrote a wonderful article about former legislator Cao Yuanzhang, could you please email it to me so I can read it?” I said: “You can read it on *Matsu Online*!” (S. Lin 2013)

These dialogues (featuring the writer’s elderly parents, her siblings, and her student) show how Liu Jiaguo’s longstanding opposition activism and his experience using print media to affect popular opinion in fact laid the foundation for the widespread acceptance of *Matsu Online*. Below I will examine the website layout, management, and participation by netizens to explore how *Matsu Online* outpaced print media in the digital age and gradually grew from a website devoted to political machinations into a part of daily life in Matsu.

## Digital Matsu

The layout of *Matsu Online* is based on a commercially available program for online forums. It has been successively adjusted many times over the



Fig. 5.2 The main page of *Matsu Online*

years, and it continues to change today. The interface and online content discussed here comes mainly from data collected over two years from November 2010 to October 2012, supplemented with my field research in the islands. This was also the period of peak usage for *Matsu Online*—with limited use of smartphone and application software (such as Facebook) in the islands at the time, the website’s significance was epochal. The structure of the site’s main page can be divided into the center, top, two sides, and four lower sections (Fig. 5.2). Each block has its own features and orientation to satisfy netizens’ demand for variety. Through close analysis, we can see how the people of Matsu also live together in an online community.

### *The Central Section*

The central section of *Matsu Online* is the liveliest, with daily updates of “Matsu News,” the community discussion forum “Free Talk,” and stories about life on Matsu in “Life & Culture” and “Video & Image,” and so on. These sections are the most popular on the website. The webmaster and associate webmasters search the major Taiwanese newspapers for news about Matsu and publish it in the “Matsu News” section. These daily updates not only attract netizens to consistently check the site for the newest information, they also make the website seem current and relevant.



By reading *Matsu Online*, people can quickly learn about the latest trends in Matsu and become aware of the latest news about the area.

Unlike “Matsu News,” the information in “Free Talk” comes from posts made by netizens themselves. The content on “Free Talk” is multifarious and enticing, and can be largely divided into two categories: politics and local life. Most of the political topics are complaints against local government agencies, such as satirically expressed criticism that government responses are well behind the times: “Matsu government efficiency is terrific! Really terrific!” (CTC 2011). Local topics might include something like: “What happened to the promises of the Taiwan Power Company?” (Shiyuan 2011). Netizens post about all sorts of issues in their daily lives, and air their indignation, while others can “respond” and express their own opinions.

Indeed, “Free Talk” itself, as the webmaster emphasized, is designed to attract the participation of netizens; its entries are organized sequentially by what has received the latest comment, with the newest placed at the top of the list. However, if a topic receives a lot of commentary, it leaps to the top as an important entry. For example, when netizens like a particular article, they can use the “clap” function to express their support. When an article has received more than fifteen “claps,” the website software automatically adds a thumbs-up icon (👍) in front of that article’s title, indicating that it has received a lot of attention. At the same time, whenever a 👍 appears, the article gets bumped up to the top of the “Free Talk” section. In this way, “Free Talk” continually stimulates reader participation.

Moving down the page, one comes to the “Life & Culture” section, which is oriented more toward interesting stories and self-expression. Here, netizens post about all kinds of events in their lives, such as “The paths I’ve taken—for my schoolmates who graduated around ’75” (Mojieke 2011). The webmaster sometimes adds articles about the natural landscape of Matsu. For example, he posted a poem written by a local called “Autumn glimpsed from the pathways of Ox Horn, Nangan, Matsu” (admin 2011a), and posted an article entitled “A red-throated loon, which hasn’t been seen here or in Taiwan for 40 years, has been spotted in Dongyin” (admin 2011c). This section, by mixing local information with landscape and culture, avoids being presented as diary entries or as formal “cultural” representation.

Next is the “Video & Image” section, where netizens can enjoy images and accounts of various events. Most of them are about the life-cycle rituals of Matsu people, such as the “long-awaited wedding photos of Sun Xiaohao and Wang Jingyi” (admin 2011b), which gives people who did not attend the wedding a chance to see the ceremony. Similarly, this section is also for people to mourn the dead. In the post “My father Cao Dianzhang” (Ruiyun 2011), Cao Ruiyun describes how much she misses her late father, and at the end includes an obituary. Below, Chen Qingzhi, Yang Suisheng, Xiaoxiao Cao, and Lanlang Qingtian, among others, all left comments. In addition, teachers also post photos and videos from school events. For example, in December 2010, Banli Elementary held quite a few activities, and added many photos to this section for everyone to enjoy.<sup>2</sup> Parents can use this online venue to see their children’s participation; thus, it functions as a “virtual contact book” for parents and the school. Overall, these photos and videos allow netizens to participate in each other’s life rituals and important events in the virtual world. It connects people in Matsu to those who moved to Taiwan, and them to the wider world, thus forming a new virtual community.

Continuing down the page are the sections “Activity Info” and “Matsu Board.” Here we see a unique aspect of *Matsu Online*. Aside from the ordinary netizens, businesses, and local community organizations posting in these sections, all levels of government agencies, the army, and the media, also registered here to promulgate government policy and answer citizens’ questions. It is truly astonishing how many government agencies have registered on *Matsu Online*. From the largest county-level “Lianjiang County Government” to subordinate units, and even the national court and the military (registered under “General Government Section Heads”)—all have registered accounts (Fig. 5.3). It has become a kind of bulletin board for all levels of government organizations. Even *Matsu Daily*, the media outlet of the Lianjiang County government, has an account on *Matsu Online*, registered on August 22, 2005, and makes online corrections to mistakes that have appeared in print. Undoubtedly, *Matsu Online* has become embedded in the daily life of Matsu and is indispensable to understanding Matsu society in this period.

Lastly, the “Business Info” section collects different merchants selling all kinds of products. Many online shopping sites charge extra shipping



Fig. 5.3 All levels of government sections in Matsu have their own accounts on *Matsu Online*

fees to mail goods to Matsu, so *Matsu Online* offers a platform for shoppers to find one another in order to split the fees. If they buy in bulk, they may also receive discounts. *Matsu Online* has thereby become a helper for people living in Matsu.

### *The Top Section*

The top section of the main page of *Matsu Online* displays links labeled “Travel Matsu,” “Soldiers’ Girls,” “Discussion Boards,” “Message

Board,” “Weather,” “Search,” “Top Posts,” “Private Messaging,” “Cached Pages,” and “Simplified Chinese.” Of these, the travel information page “Travel Matsu” and the personal connections page “Soldiers’ Girls” are the most important, so I will begin with them.

Clicking on “Travel Matsu” directs the user to another website with fairly comprehensive information for visitors about lodging, food, and transportation. On the right side, one can find blogs labeled “Happenings” and “Recommended Posts.” The “Happenings” blog consists mainly of messages posted by the webmaster, announcing current activities and events to interested online readers. At the bottom of the page, the “Recommendations” section shares links to blogs and discussion boards, and it offers readers a chance to see what visitors to Matsu have written about their experiences. In today’s digital age, many people explore a destination online before they travel, and “Travel Matsu” offers a platform where travelers can find information about Matsu before they go there.

The “Soldiers’ Girls” page was formed by a group of young women in Taiwan, whose boyfriends served as soldiers in Matsu, who referred to themselves as “soldiers’ girls” (*a’bing mei*). With its history as a wartime frontline, many young men are sent to Matsu for military service. Given the islands’ remoteness, many do not want to win the notorious “Jinmen-Matsu prize” (*jin ma jiang*) and be packed off to the islands. The main issue is the inconvenience of transportation to and from the islands: the distance separates the soldiers from their loved ones, and sometimes also nips burgeoning young romances in the bud. The forum “Soldiers’ Girls” was formed as a way to deal with potential “mutiny.” The main page is divided into sections: “Cool News,” “Discussion Boards,” “Personal Stories,” and “Pictures.” Postings on the site mostly involve these women’s personal stories, or inquiries into how to visit Matsu to see a boyfriend. In the “Pictures” section, many of these “soldiers’ girls” share photos of themselves with their soldier boyfriends. Whether the relationship is serious or not, the photos attract a lot of attention. The girls are of a similar age, have shared experiences, and they invariably encourage one another, producing a warm and supportive atmosphere.

The other links to the right offer personalized functions, allowing each netizen to look for whatever information he or she needs, and to use the site according to individual interests.

*The Side Columns*

The left column consists largely of travel information, in particular up-to-date information about the takeoff and landing times of flights, and whether ships have set sail or not. This information is of essential importance for Matsu islanders, who rely heavily on ocean and air travel to connect them to Taiwan and China. *Matsu Online* is thus an indispensable resource for residents and visitors. Further down the column, one finds detailed information about each individual island of Matsu. This is useful not only for residents of the islands, but also for potential travelers to Matsu, who can find a convenient source of answers to their questions. If travelers do not find everything they need, they can use the links at the top of the main page under “Travel Matsu” to search further. In this way, *Matsu Online* has become an important window onto Matsu for the outside world.

The right-hand column demonstrates the emphasis that *Matsu Online* places on culture: the webmaster adds links related to culture and history here, encouraging visitors to browse them. Under “Recommended Posts,” “Xia Shuhua-Leimengdi Stories” are prominently placed (to be discussed in Chapter 6). There is also “a series on Literature and History from *Matsu Report*,” in which the webmaster offers links to articles he published in *Matsu Report* from 1996 to 2004. At the very bottom are links to all manner of blogs that have to do with Matsu culture, presenting glimpses of the islands from different perspectives.

*Developments and Changes in Layout*

Initially grounded in a concern for Matsu’s future, *Matsu Online* was at first designed to facilitate political discussions, and “Free Talk” was its only discussion board. However, given the webmaster’s educational background in history and his longstanding interest in culture, he quickly established the section on “Life & Culture.” “Matsu News”—updates of news about Matsu from Taiwan and China—was later added to supplement the media’s neglect of this place. Under Liu Jianguo’s sound management, *Matsu Online*’s readership gradually increased, and governmental offices and other social associations began to post advertisements to inform citizens of their services. *Matsu Online* became even more like a community website when “Matsu Board” was finally set up


for people to find information easily. As successful management attracted businesses, the section on “Business Info” was subsequently added. When Facebook started to become popular in Taiwan, *Matsu Online* set up a link to it in December 2012 in order to facilitate the sharing of posts between the two forums. The development of the layout of *Matsu Online* shows how it has become ingrained into the texture of life in Matsu. In the twenty-first century, the people of Matsu live not only in their local communities, but also in the online world.

Nevertheless, a number of subsequent developments caused a decline in some of its functions. For instance, the “Soldiers’ Girls” section gradually lost users because of the progressive scaling back of military forces before finally becoming inactive. With the ubiquitous spread of Facebook, netizens now prefer to use their personal pages there to share their opinions with friends without being maliciously attacked or bullied by anonymous criticism on a public site. The popularity of “Free Talk” also took a nosedive. Faced with the “self-media” era, Liu Jianguo recognized that *Matsu Online* needed to change its format. In 2017, *Matsu Online* underwent a major overhaul—it transformed from a critique-based media format to a service-oriented website, and also launched a mobile version for cellphones. Website management was directed toward up-to-the-minute news about Matsu, gradually turning the site into a tool-based medium. In 2016 the site began offering a live feed from the harbor, and then from the airport in 2017, to provide more on-demand information for users.

### **The Online Self**

Matsu Online is a Web 2.0 site, so it can be both read and added to by visitors to the site. Everyone can be an online author, adding information or opinions at will. The website’s copyright statement specifies that information is published both by website personnel and by online community participants. Apart from expressing their personal opinions about Matsu, netizens also post all sorts of articles related to it. On a website of this kind, users play an important role: information is provided by everyone, and this diverse community of people is itself a source of what appears on the site.

During this process, however, website managers do play the role of arbiters. In the event that something inappropriate is posted, the site offers a “Report” button, with which readers can explain to the webmaster why an item should be reviewed. If posted material involves “a personal attack or insult, or spreads rumors, it will be deleted,” the webmaster said. If the content continues to be posted, the site deals with it by blocking the originating IP address. However, the most common way for people to communicate with the webmaster is to make a phone call to request a deletion of a post that may be harmful or tendentious. For example, when I was in Matsu doing fieldwork, someone added pictures from a school reunion to the “Activity Info” section. A woman called the webmaster to ask him to remove a photo of herself with a male classmate whose arm was around her shoulder. She said she worried that the photo might cause troubles for her marriage were it not to be removed. The webmaster immediately deleted the photo. Clearly, the fact that it is responsive to the needs of the online community is one reason that *Matsu Online* has established itself firmly as a part of Matsu life. A successful virtual community is based on “its ability to manage different subjects, create its own style and norms, and continue to attract active participants” (Zhai 2000: 236).

Anyone can read the information on *Matsu Online*, but content can be posted only by those who have registered as users with the website. There are five levels of registered user: new, beginner (more than 20 postings), mid-level (more than 100 postings), senior (more than 250 postings), and expert (more than 400 postings). Above, I mentioned the “clap” and “recommend” functions on *Matsu Online*. Once a post receives more than fifteen claps, it is marked with a  , which indicates that it has elicited significant discussion. This icon means that the post has garnered a certain number of readers, and that the discussion has been relatively active. The number of claps received results in points for the user, which in turn contributes to the ascent from a “beginner” to “mid-level” user, and from a “senior” to an “expert” user. For every clap, a member receives one point. When a post or picture reaches a certain number of points, the user is promoted as follows: 30 points to make beginner user; 90 points to become a mid-level user; 180 points to become a senior user; and 360 points to become an expert user (admin 2005). It is obvious that

the posts of expert users are given the highest profile. One might wonder whether this way of organizing users generates a kind of “hierarchy” between different users. However, it is important to point out that this ranking is based on the efforts of individual users and the support of netizens, which is quite different from traditional place-based or kinship systems.

Evidently, these encouragement mechanisms and the different levels of user are mainly designed to encourage interactions between netizens and to increase traffic on the site, but they can also efficiently gauge the attitudes of users. The response of any given netizen alone may not be taken seriously, but in the online world, netizens’ responses can quickly gather power. These opinions may diverge from the judgments of the political leaders, but grassroots efforts sometimes do influence final outcomes. Already in 2007, during my early fieldwork, a local government official put it this way:

Government officials in Matsu aren’t the same as officials in Taiwan. When we get up in the morning, the first thing we do is look at *Matsu Online*, to see whether anything has happened that we need to deal with right away.

In the real world, the status of individuals in Matsu is well defined, and their behavior is constrained by social custom and expectations, especially in the relatively restrictive environment of island life. On *Matsu Online*, one does not need to use a real name, and all that is needed to open an account is an email address. When their identity is blurred, people can not only freely exhibit themselves in ways they may not be able to in their ordinary lives (Turkle 1997 [1995]), but also participate publicly while remaining concealed. The demarcation between public and private becomes less and less clear, and traditional values and norms exert less of a hold over people. With social controls weakened, netizens have more courage to express their hidden, more extreme, or more emotional selves. This is shown in the way in which netizens choose their online names. Some examples of names include “Casting off my millstone,” “Little Li’s mom...and her knife,” and even “Making my millions as a legislator,” which satirizes, ridicules, and criticizes the corruption of government officials.

Not having to reveal their real names offers netizens a new space in which to express themselves. The language on *Matsu Online* often



includes acerbic or surrealistically humorous expressions invented by netizens, through which they can more fully articulate their opinions. They openly challenge standards of speech and break the traditional authority of hegemonic discourse. *Matsu Online* allows people to engage in “self-imagining as an everyday social project” (Appadurai 1996: 4).

### ***Matsu Online* in Local Society**

The most dynamic conversations on *Matsu Online* are about political issues. *Matsu Daily* was founded by the military government against the backdrop of Matsu as a military frontline, and had long been subject to military control. After the lifting of martial law, the newspaper was transferred to the county government, and its head is now appointed by the county commissioner. Given this lack of neutrality, locals often ridicule it as the “Doormat-su Daily” (*mapi bao*). When *Matsu Online* started, it offered a platform to challenge this media-governmental entity. Particularly on “Free Talk,” netizens express trenchant criticism of governmental policies, and keep an eye on all manner of governmental actions. *Matsu Online* became a social space, with connotations of Habermas’s (1989[1962]) “public sphere.”

One minor controversy, involving a calendar that was initiated on “Free Talk,” demonstrates how online critiques can influence the government. In 2010 the county government celebrated the centennial of the ROC and designed a special calendar for 2011. They chose pictures that were not militarily dogmatic, but very local in flavor, mainly scenes of Matsu’s war heritage, ecology, and culture from different angles. The 365 photos were intended to provide an overview of a rich and varied Matsu. After 7,500 copies of the centennial calendar were printed and sent to homes, a *Matsu Online* user posted a piece called “Would you dare hang this calendar on your wall?”

In the mail today I got the centennial calendar that the Lianjiang county government sent to everyone here on Matsu, and immediately...I opened it up to see the images inside, and the first thing I saw was an ad for Matsu Distillery products ...and I thought, don’t all advertisements for alcohol have to be printed with a warning? How come the government ignored this policy? (LOLO 2011)

張貼者: 忠哥 新進會員

個人資料 私人訊息 郵件 回覆 引言 檢舉

馬港天后宮選舉諸多疑問? -- 閱讀人次: 3557

請問天后宮現任委員本年度(屆)委員選舉諸多疑問你們現任委員及監察員不懷疑嗎?, 請給全體社友一個合理交代, 否則將收集證據訴之於法。

掌聲鼓勵: 22

註冊: 2008-12-25  
發表文章: 8  
發表時間: 2010-12-12  
FORM: Logged

推薦

掌聲鼓勵 本站 19 位網友鼓勵。

讚 成為你朋友中第一個說這話的人。 分享

Fig. 5.4 A netizen challenges the Tianhou Temple election

The following day, netizen “Changle” responded: “Officials should be more careful about showing how little concern they have for the law, or all their good policies will end in failure.” Adding fuel to the fire, a netizen added: “Why hasn’t the appropriate authority in the Lianjiang government showed up to explain or apologize? ... Obviously the government’s crisis response needs work.” Three days later, the county commissioner himself held a meeting to assuage public anger and levied a fine of NT\$100,000 against the bureau that had published the calendar.

Governmental organizations are not the sole target; civic organizations can also come under fire. An election for the committee of an important Matsu temple, the Tianhou Temple, is a case in point. On December 12, netizen Zhongge (2010) wrote a post pointing out many problems with the election. It rapidly attracted attention and soon received a “recommended” icon (Fig. 5.4).

Another netizen called Mashan then claimed that the election was rife with issues, such as the facts that some voters had not showed up to cast votes, and that Tianhou Temple workers had taken the ballots to their homes. Other members of the temple did not know they were supposed to vote, yet ballots were cast for them. At the end of his post, he called for the relevant authorities to come forward and explain the situation. Another user, Hannibal B., further cast aspersions on Tianhou Temple by pointing to Taiwan’s temples and the overall negative atmosphere that surrounded them. The suggestion was that

many temples around Taiwan were inappropriately involved with political power and local factions. He expressed his hope that the temples around Matsu would not be similarly polluted but would instead serve as local spiritual centers. However, on December 13, the user “Little Li’s mom...and her knife” raised even more issues, including the fact that the Temple committee was giving gifts of clothing, engaging in public relations activities, “exploiting the Goddess to make money,” and so on. He or she felt the committee elections were deeply flawed and demanded that the elected members go before the Tianhou Goddess and cast divinatory blocks in order to show that they were truly chosen by the deities.

On December 14, 2010 Liangshanding wrote a post titled “Were the Mazu Temple Committee Elections in Mangang Suitable, Fair, and Legal?” in which he vehemently condemned the election. After this string of online criticisms, on December 16 the temple committee chair finally posted an announcement of his resignation from the Tianhou Temple committee (Zeng 2010). This kind of event may seem familiar to us now, but it had never happened before in Matsu, which had long been governed by the army. Now netizens who are strangers in their ordinary lives can join together to compel a responsible party to make amends. The above events took only five short days. The internet-enabled rapidity with which opinions are collected and disseminated on *Matsu Online* has transformed Matsu society at large.

### **Online Intimacy and Place Identity**

Even more surprisingly, one of the first anonymous netizens (“Eric”) to criticize the temple committee posted again a month later, and revealed his real name, Feng Quanzhong, apologizing to the former committee head, and admitting his own mistakes:

Based only on my own personal guesswork...I made criticisms without seeking confirmation from the people involved, and did harm to the former chair and others, which led to them being unfairly censured by other people. (Q. Feng 2011)

I asked Feng why he had done this. He said that he had come to feel that this type of criticism was “too direct,” and that his apology “benefited the

The screenshot shows a user profile on the left and an advertisement on the right. The user profile includes: 張貼者: 毛利蘭, 資深會員, 註冊: 2004-09-28, 發表文章: 228, 回覆數: 281, 發表時間: 2011-06-14, FORM: Logged. The advertisement is titled '現貨學習褲' with a view count of 1244. It includes a URL: http://tw.myblog.yahoo.com/jw!133WjIOEBgT\_Pf6nxMkWhb8h26EpJa4-/. The description reads: '現貨學習褲-編實寶戒掉尿布 輕鬆換穿不用擔心尿原滴滿地 1件100元'. At the bottom, it shows a phone number: 電話 2 57 陳媽媽.

Fig. 5.5 A seller provides a phone number in an ad on *Matsu Online*

community” (at that time, Feng was the secretary of the Community Association of Matsu). He continued in an ironic tone:

I used the name “Eric” to help my cousin post a rental ad on *Matsu Online*, and I gave my own phone number. Someone used that to figure out that I was “Eric.” He went and found my boss...and my boss “suggested” that it “would be best” if I apologized.

Feng’s public apology reveals that his online behavior was discovered and threatened by the traditional local power; in Matsu the distance between the physical and virtual worlds seems to have been difficult to maintain.<sup>3</sup> But why did it happen? For example, why did Feng give his own phone number on the “Business Info” section of the website? This is rarely seen on other mainstream websites. On most online auction sites, buyers and sellers bid online, and only after the transaction do they exchange their personal information. This offers some safeguards when two strangers do business. However, in Matsu it is common for people to give their own phone numbers in their postings on *Matsu Online*: often, at the bottom of many ads, users’ personal contact information appears, making their identities at least partially public before any deal has been made (Fig. 5.5).

Locals consider this completely normal and have no problem with it. When I asked about it, they looked puzzled and responded: “Anyone who uses *Matsu Online* must have some connection to Matsu!” Put another way, they trust that the users of *Matsu Online* are part of the island community in some way; giving out their contact information is a way of showing their intimacy with each other (Herzfeld 1996). This

practice, tinted as it is with public intimacy, is premised on the users' imagination of the offline Matsu community at large and is important to the formation of place identity.

### **Matsu, Taiwan, and China Simultaneously**

The development of *Matsu Online* has expanded the island's reach by forging instantaneous links to other places and offering the island society a new basis for its social actions. Under the WZA, the government tried its hardest to bring each island individually into the war effort, rather than uniting them. "One island, one life" was the island imaginary of the military. After the WZA was dismantled, Matsu began to develop more links to the outside world. The appearance of *Matsu Online* further disrupted the isolation of each island and interconnected Matsu, Taiwan, and China. The up-to-the-minute reports on the 2008 Shanlong fire shows how *Matsu Online* was able to instantaneously link Matsu, Taiwan, and China.

At 8:40 pm on January 20, 2008, a fire erupted in Shanlong, Nangan. The associate webmaster of *Matsu Online*, who was in Taiwan at the time, quickly posted the news at 8:50 pm. The information was updated every half-hour until the fire was finally controlled twelve hours later. During that time, netizens in Taiwan continually asked for more information about the fire: "Can you tell us what's going on with the fire? Please report" (Zhonghe Ahfang 2008). The webmaster then discovered that important officials, such as the Lianjiang county commissioner and associate commissioner, were in China on official business, and he criticized them for leaving Matsu to fend for itself as they once again toadied to Chinese officials (admin 2008). A stream of criticism forced the officials to return to Matsu the following day.

Moreover, after these events, netizens offered different types of information on *Matsu Online*, hoping to build a realistic picture of the circumstances. For example, someone posted a picture of a building destroyed by the fire, showing the utter devastation (Biancheng Huashi 2008), while another user wrote to describe what he himself had witnessed as the fire raged (Aide 2008). As a small archipelago on Taiwan's northern

most border with a tiny population, Matsu is rarely reported on by the Taiwanese media. When the fire started, netizens posted information on *Matsu Online* as rapidly as reports from Satellite News Gathering, thus helping the people of Matsu build a picture of what was happening at any given moment. If an imagined community is marked by its simultaneity (Anderson 1991 [1983]: 24; Taylor 2004: 157), then the community of Matsu today has stretched across Taiwan and China, and has been reconfigured in the online world.

### **Social Movement On-and-Offline**

It is not only online that netizens come together to discuss; they also initiate and participate in concrete actions in the real world. The 2011 “823 March” that took place on Ketagalan Boulevard in front of the Presidential Office is a case in point.

Land issues in Matsu have long been a vexing problem. As stateless islands till the mid-twentieth century, land regulation of Matsu relied mostly on personal agreements. The military government at the beginning did not establish any land administration bureau to handle land registration.<sup>4</sup> The army could simply commandeer local land to build barracks and construct fortifications without gaining the consent of the local people.<sup>5</sup> Some locals were merely offered a verbal agreement: “The land will revert to you after counteractions against the mainland are over.”<sup>6</sup> Only in 1972 did the Lianjiang County government establish a civil administrative bureau to deal with land affairs, and finally issued the first land deeds. Still, at that time, the bureau only registered land within villages, which accounted for a mere tenth of the territory in Matsu. After the military rule, the government finally established a land management bureau in 1993, which surveyed all of the land and registered it. Unfortunately, these surveys were riddled with inaccuracies, and caused much public anger. Moreover, under the law, anyone who wished to register a piece of land needed to produce proof of “occupancy” from before the first land deeds of 1972. This so-called occupancy had to involve “cultivation of the land.” Early usage of land in Matsu, however, was not always connected to cultivation, but for example could be a family “firewood patch” (F. *tshia liang*), where plants were allowed to

grow naturally and were then cut and gathered whenever fuel was needed. Officials frequently considered such plots of land to be “uncultivated,” and therefore did not allow their return to the Matsu people. As for the land on which Matsu locals dried small shrimp in the sun, officials were even more convinced that such places “were areas without any effort at cultivation,” and so were not to be returned either. These “ownerless” areas of land finally became “state-owned,” and were thereby legally expropriated by the state. These land issues are a problem handed down from the period of military rule that have been frustratingly difficult to resolve.

Those people who did not obtain their land from the state frequently expressed outrage online over the immoral seizures of land by the government, eliciting many responses (Lin and Wang 2012: 127–33). Since the issue represents a continuing source of communal pain for Matsu, in recent years it has become an important issue which every candidate for county commissioner’s position must address. For example, in 2006, after candidate Wu Shizi (2006) lost the election for county commissioner, he published a statement to remind the government that “Resolving the land problem depends solely upon whether government leaders ‘really care.’” In 2009, the independent candidate for county commissioner, Chen Caineng, also focused on how to resolve the land seizure problem.

On April 22, 2011, netizen Wang Changming (2011a) put up a public post on *Matsu Online* with the title: “On August 23, we will take to the streets of Taiwan to demand the return of the rights and interests of the Matsu people.” In the piece, he gives an impassioned description of the land problem in Matsu and recalls the 1987 protest for freedom by the Matsu people in Taiwan, calling for locals to once again rise up and demand their rights. The post not only sparked a chain of discussion on *Matsu Online*, but it also gave rise to the 823 March for land reform on Ketagalan Boulevard in Taipei (Fig. 5.6).

Wang Changming is the village head of Banli, Beigan. He had lived through the oppressive treatment of military officials during the WZA era. When martial law was lifted in Taiwan in 1987, but the government still maintained military control over Jinmen and Matsu, Wang, who lived in Taiwan at the time, participated in the first protest march there



Fig. 5.6 Matsu people at the 823 March with the building of KMT Central Party Department in the background  
(Photo by Wang Chun-Hui)

on August 23rd of that year. He moved back to Matsu in 1998 and was elected village head in 2006. He was unstinting in his efforts to redress the problems of land in Matsu. Because of their common interest in the issue of land seizures, Wang Changming and Chen Caineng gradually came into closer contact with each other. When ordinary people's land appeals were ignored or dismissed by the government, they were increasingly attracted to political outsiders for assistance. On September 7, 2010, when Chen appeared before the county legislative assembly, Wang also came to participate. On that day, the "Return Our Ancestral Lands Association" was established, and Wang was put forward as the head of the association. It agreed upon a deadline of March 1, 2011. If the government did not produce legislation by that date, the association would launch recall petitions against the county commissioner and the entire legislative council.

*Matsu Online* thus became a platform through which Wang could communicate with citizens and confront the land issue. He posted continuous updates about the situation and emphasized the importance of the return of Matsu land. After 2010, he commenced even more active efforts. He publicly posted a petition and forms online and frequently



announced new signatures and information, thereby turning *Matsu Online* into a center for news about the land issue. By October 4, the petition had garnered 687 signatures (C. Chen 2010).<sup>7</sup>

As a result of the online activity and the insistence of leaders, a protest march gradually took shape. A degree of planning and coordination were needed in order to concentrate forces effectively. Holding the protest on August 23 was a clever decision. The 823 bombardment of Jinmen had heightened tensions between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, and the date had special historical significance. Aside from the date, the marchers also needed a new slogan and something eye-catching to emphasize the idea behind the protest and attract more participants. Wang (2011b) posted twenty-some slogans online and asked people to choose between them. Chen (2011a) recommended the idea of “the power of a single cloth!” This post was the most hotly discussed of the group, and it attracted a total of 6,641 readers by August 14, 2011. Chen recommended that every person with a specific land complaint should write down the lot number, location, and civil defense number on an 8 x 23 cm piece of cloth. These cloths would then be sewn together into a huge flag and carried in the procession. The purpose was to recall the 823 March and to symbolize the land they had lost. It also aimed to unite the people together to rally for justice. Although the idea of the flag was not ultimately implemented because of practical difficulties, it undoubtedly absorbed and concentrated the fury of the netizens.

This protest movement is an important case of an event being fomented and organized online, and then implemented in the real world. *Matsu Online* played an important role throughout: it allowed people from across the world to learn about what was happening, and it offered a conduit for the anger of those who were plagued by land problems. It also exposed the seizures by the state, the inflexibility of bureaucrats, and the impotence of politicians. When the online community’s discontent reached a certain level, its force was redirected towards real-world action. On the day of the march, demonstrators often mentioned *Matsu Online*, and when participants met each other, they even introduced themselves by their online comments. The internet gathered people, produced ideas, and generated concrete action in the real world.

### Discovering Matsu

The discussion above clearly demonstrates that Matsu today is neither the transient fishing island of yore, nor the military warzone frontline. The variety of mediating forms—words, photos, music, films—offered by *Matsu Online* also shows the different angles from which the people of Matsu write, imagine, and discover a new Matsu.

The bottom right of *Matsu Online*'s main page contains a listing of blogs by local writers and artists, exploring Matsu's language, culture, and natural landscape. They show us how "today's Matsu" has been newly understood. For example, there is a thread for schoolteachers' discussions of traditional Matsu religion and folk culture. There is also a "Blog of a Cool Principal" in which the "cool principal," Wang Jianhua, focuses on describing Matsu's natural world. Along the left-hand side of his blog are options such as "Flapping Feathers," "Summertime Feathers," and "Ecology Notes." By clicking on one of the links, one is directed towards his careful reflections on the island's ecology. "Flapping Feathers" provides his observations of birds; for example, in "Small Pool, Unbridled Life-force," he wrote:

These past two days, the rainy season has covered the land, and the water has been pooling up

From my car, I've made records of the birds in the little pools (I won't startle the birds if I photograph them from the car)

There are egret, yellow-headed heron, yellow wagtail, brown-backed shrike, white-bellied water rail, pintail snipe, painted snipe, pheasant-tailed jaconda...

He continues by telling netizens how they can enjoy these Matsu birds:

At 5:30pm I returned to school after hosting ballplayers from Xiju, and I went to observe again

The painted snipe, which I thought had already moved on, reappeared when disturbed by a white-bellied water rail

If you want to appreciate the birds, don't cross the pavement

Just wait quietly, and you'll see some wonderful things! (J. Wang 2010a)

In "Ecology Notes," he posts about creatures other than birds. For example, the article "Let our children learn to do more—going

clamming” talks about his experience taking his children to dig up clams. “If You Don’t Do It Now, You’ll Have to Wait Until Next Year!” (J. Wang 2011) offers a picture of Fuji cherries and tells people where they can find and enjoy them. One can also observe how he focuses on helping people to “discover Matsu” and to experience the unique aspects of the islands.

*Matsu Online* also has a blog, written by Cao Yifeng, that younger people enjoy called “Ascending Feng’s Valley.” Cao is part of a younger generation; and his way of expressing himself in his blog is to post mainly photographs, with text serving an auxiliary role. His photos all have to do with daily life, as witnessed by the post containing the comment “It’s bass season and you can see it from every household” (Y. Cao 2011), followed by a long succession of photographs about hanging the dried fish. Photographs cannot transmit the same quantity and depth of information as words, but recording daily life and one’s experiences in photos can often bring a sense of immediacy.

In short, both schoolteachers and cultural workers actively apply different kinds of media on *Matsu Online* in order to share what they know about the history, culture, and natural ecology of this place. In doing so, they hope to bring new perspectives of Matsu to the netizens.

### **Conclusion: A Place with its Own Value**

This chapter has shown how *Matsu Online* has achieved a level of unprecedented influence in these islands. Its popularity can be explicated first from its geographic condition. Previous scholarship shows us that whether a community website can have a significant impact on a place or not is closely related to its situation in that given locality. Community websites often thrive in newly developed suburbs in which immigrants have just arrived and modern technologies are more readily accepted (Hampton and Wellman 2003; Postill 2011). The Matsu archipelago is located on the furthest northern border of the ROC, and its inherently dispersive mountainous island topology had traditionally made communication for people scattered across Matsu difficult, both between individual islands and between the islands and the outside world. The linkages provided by the World Wide Web appear to be all the more

important in this context. Second, with its particular historical background as a military zone, Matsu's main news medium, *Matsu Daily*, has long been controlled by the government, though local dissidents had established self-founded journals such as *Matsu Light* and *Matsu Report* for several years and had gathered considerable energy. This is why the internet, when it came to the islands at the end of the twentieth century, successfully collected the readers of print media, and used its new technology, which can combine words, music, and images, in more powerful ways to attract a bigger readership. *Matsu Online* thus built extraordinary momentum and influence.

Overall, *Matsu Online* changed the way in which the islanders access information, providing an entirely new platform for the dissemination of news. In the age before smart phone-based communication software became popular, it was the most important media technology of the time, which changed how people communicated with each other and the social rhythm of the entire archipelago. In contemporary Matsu, people live in both the physical and the virtual worlds; local residents and netizens create the reality of Matsu together.

Nevertheless, for a small archipelago, the importance of *Matsu Online* perhaps has even more to do with the fact that it allows people to transcend the self and traditional social relationships. The rise of *Matsu Online* gave any individual on Matsu a new virtual life—that is, a blank page to write on. It allowed individuals to hide behind an account number and express their opinions freely. In this virtual world, netizens can be reborn as beginners and grow up into experts, gradually gathering influence and affecting the real world. Although these new selves do not entirely throw off traditional social roles, they have already superseded the geographical borders of the islands and have become interconnected to form a new Taiwan-Matsu-China existence. They stretch across the Taiwan Strait, and are able to generate social movements that demand greater rights for the Matsu people.

Taking one step further, *Matsu Online* has not only created a new kind of community, but also a different sense of place: in this instantaneously linked online world, Matsu is no longer the periphery, but the center. *Matsu Online*, therefore, offers us an excellent example to understand how new media have created a different imaginary, that is, “a new place”

(Boellstorff 2008; Miller and Horst 2012). If in *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1991 [1983]) told us how print capitalism could change local communities into homogeneous and empty social units, then *Matsu Online* demonstrates the opposite: that the internet can turn a locality into a new homeland of the mind towards which the diasporic people feel a sense of belonging and to which they anchor their emotions. This is likely not only unique to Matsu, but is rather a phenomenon that can be seen in other online emigrant communities (Basu 2007; Mitra 1997). In other words, internet technology has become an important means of producing place. Matsu people around the world can depict and imagine “the new Matsu” online, creating intimate ties with it that did not previously exist. Via online media, Matsu today has already transformed itself from a peripheral archipelago and a Cold War “anticommunist frontline” into a place with its own value and worth.