

A Critique of the Chinese Radical Net-Philosophy Community

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Abstract: This article delves into the dynamics of the Chinese radical net-philosophy community, a unique digital and radical subculture where young enthusiasts engage with philosophical ideas outside of traditional academic frameworks. We examine how radical knowledge was produced, validated, and circulated within these net communities, focusing on the aestheticisation of knowledge and its impact on political engagement. This study reveals how alternative intellectual pursuit in a digitalised pile of debris, where form and style prioritise over substance, synchronising ideas and actions leads to the opposite of its progressive politics. Reviewing the aestheticisation and alienation of knowledge, we examine the recurrence of establishing authority and status and the implication of aesthetic hierarchies and performative politics on the net community's capacity for meaningful political action. Ultimately, we argue that while the aestheticisation of knowledge acknowledged a broader post-millennial youth. spiritual crisis, the net-philosophy community was marked by a depoliticisation of intellectual debates and the failure of political engagement in digital spaces.

Keywords: net-philosophy communities; aestheticisation of knowledge; political engagement; intellectual hierarchy; China

1. Introduction: A Controversy over Slavoj Žižek's Course

We came together to produce a critique of the Chinese radical net-philosophy community because we share the desire to call for more reflexive and emancipatory politics in the digital subculture, which is increasingly moving in the opposite direction. As a contingency embedded in historical necessity, we met to reflect upon the current development of the net-philosophy community in China, with the initiation of the first author, who thought the second author would be helpful. Largely impressed and touched by the thoughtful praxis of the first author's radical net-philosophy group, the second author learned and self-educated to collaborate on this piece of critical writing.

First of all, we need to declare that we sincerely appreciate the sprouting of heated debates, vibrant political ideas, and intellectual energies from the net philosophy community that is constantly facing severe surveillance and censorship, to a degree of police raids and harassment. We are excited to see this emerging digital subculture attempting to transgress power and discipline, breaking the ivory tower of academics and producing radical philosophical ideas that touch upon sensitive topics such as state power, party, communism, revolution, and self-emancipation. Yet, we should remember what Walter Benjamin said about the angel of history, that his face is turned toward the past, hoping to save lives from the pile of debris, and yet a storm from heaven blows him in the opposite direction (Benjamin 2020).

The recent controversy involving Slavoj Žižek's online course in China further deadened our hearts. It sparked significant debates, not just about the commodification of knowledge but also about the unique dynamics within a specific digital subculture known as the "net-philosophy" community. This event, which saw Žižek appear for only a minute in a course marketed as his own, has highlighted the growing pains of a digital landscape where knowledge, capital, and credibility often collide. For the net-philosophy community, which thrives on the intersection of intellectual pursuit and Internet culture, the incident is more than just a case of consumer dissatisfaction – it is a window into how knowledge operates, circulates, and evolves in these niche digital spaces, and what problems we confront.

Chinese net-philosophy represents a distinctive radical subculture online where young enthusiasts engage with complex philosophical ideas outside traditional academic frameworks. In these spaces, knowledge is a pursuit of intellectual growth and a form of social capital and identity formation. Unlike conventional academic settings, where structured curricula and scholarly credentials define authority, the Chinese net-philosophy community operates through decentralised, often chaotic, and highly interactive modes of knowledge exchange. Here, ideas are debated, appropriated, and reshaped in real-time, reflecting a blend of rigorous thoughts and internet culture's playful irreverence.

We aim to elucidate how knowledge functions within this digital community: how it is created, circulated, and challenged. This study sheds light on the evolving landscape of digital knowledge cultures in China, where traditional hierarchies are disrupted, and new forms of intellectual engagement continually emerge. Paradoxically, this produces new aesthetic hierarchies, alienation, and depoliticisation in digitalised knowledge reproduction.

Following the introduction, we unfold a series of analytical sections that deepen the critique of the Chinese net-philosophy community. The second section, "**Net-Philosophy**" in China, traces the emergence of online philosophical communities within China, exploring the role of Chinese digital platforms such as **Zhihu**, **Douban**, and **Baidu Zhidao** in fostering radical intellectual discussions. It highlights the desire for intellectual freedom under state censorship, revealing how these digital spaces became a fertile ground for subversive ideas while simultaneously navigating the challenges of surveillance and control.

In the third section, **Approaching Chinese Digital Culture and Net-Philosophy**, the paper adopts the methodological approach of **netnography**, a form of participant observation, to examine how knowledge is produced, shared, and validated within these online communities. The analysis situates these practices within the broader framework of Chinese digital culture, which is shaped by both local socio-political conditions and global Internet trends, thereby providing insights into the tensions between intellectual autonomy and state-imposed limitations.

The section **Practicing Alterity on Net-Philosophy Communities** then focuses on the personal and collective motivations driving participation in these spaces. Many members, disillusioned with traditional academia's confines, sought digital communities as alternatives for intellectual engagement. Here, we explore how net-philosophy communities, while offering new forms of intellectual freedom, often fall into the trap of performative political engagement – discussions that are rich in radical theory yet lack concrete political action or transformative potential. Moving to the section on **Aestheticised Knowledge as a Form of Media: Knowledge Capitalism**, we explore the relationship between intellectual production and media commodification. We argue that in the context of net-philosophy, knowledge becomes

another commodity in the **capitalist media system**, where ideas are packaged and sold based on their aesthetic appeal, thereby reinforcing capitalist dynamics. This transformation of intellectual labour into a marketable product, the paper suggests, further alienates knowledge from its potential to challenge dominant political structures.

The penultimate section, **Reflection on a Net-Leftist Group Praxis: Failure of Political Engagement**, provides a detailed case study of a net-leftist group's attempts to bridge radical philosophy with political activism. Despite initial enthusiasm, the group's efforts to translate philosophical critique into political practice ultimately faltered, illustrating the **disconnect** between the intellectual vitality of the community and its failure to produce tangible, collective political outcomes. Finally, in the **Concluding Remarks**, the paper synthesizes the critiques of the net-philosophy community, emphasizing its failure to fulfil its radical potential due to the **aestheticisation** and **commodification** of knowledge. The conclusion calls for a **repoliticisation** of these digital spaces, urging the shift from performative intellectualism to meaningful, collective political engagement. It advocates for a model of knowledge production that is both **democratic** and **action-oriented**, capable of reclaiming philosophy's transformative power in the digital age.

2. "Net-Philosophy" in China

In sharp contrast to the overarching state censorship in China, online knowledge communities are indeed very active and impactful, playing a significant role in various fields. Academic and educational digital platforms like *Zhihu* (similar to Quora) and *Baidu Zhidao* facilitate the sharing of academic knowledge and personal expertise, assisting users with educational queries and discussions. These communities are particularly impactful in China due to the high Internet penetration rate and the popularity of social media and online forums. They contribute to disseminating knowledge and information, enable grassroots organisation, and often serve as platforms for thought innovation and cultural exchange. Of course, these communities are also influenced by state censorship and regulatory practices, which shape the nature and forms of net discussions and the flow of information online.

A "net-philosophy community" is an online space where individuals engage in philosophical discussions outside traditional academic environments. These communities are typically informal, decentralised, and accessible to a wide range of participants, including students, enthusiasts, and intellectuals. They focus on exchanging ideas around philosophical topics such as post-Marxism, postmodernism, critical theory, and political philosophy, applied to contemporary social, political, and cultural issues. In these communities, intellectual authority is not determined by formal credentials but rather by peer interactions and the quality of the ideas presented (Huang et al. 2020).

Key characteristics that define a net-philosophy community include the use of digital platforms to facilitate discussions, the informality of engagement, and the diverse participation that welcomes members from various educational backgrounds. These communities are spaces where knowledge is freely shared, and participants engage in debates and intellectual exchanges. They are often shaped by local political contexts, which influence the nature of discussions. For instance, in China, online communities often navigate the challenges of state censorship while still providing a space for open intellectual exploration (Yang & Jiang 2015). Despite the regulatory constraints, these platforms enable users to explore intellectual ideas and engage in critique, offering a space for intellectual and social innovation in ways that would otherwise be restricted in formal academic institutions.

In China, popular platforms like Douban, QQ groups, WeChat groups, Bilibili, and Zhihu have become significant hubs for net-philosophy communities. Douban is a social network where users engage in discussions on a wide variety of topics, including philosophy and political theory, often focusing on Western philosophy and Chinese Marxism (Yang 2019). QQ groups and WeChat groups are widely used for more focused philosophical discussions, where members exchange ideas, share resources, and sometimes organise virtual study groups or debates. Zhihu, a popular Chinese Q&A platform similar to Quora, has also become a key space for intellectual discussions, with users engaging in debates around critical theory, postmodernism, and social issues. Although these platforms are influenced by state censorship, they remain vital spaces for intellectual engagement, offering opportunities for grassroots learning and intellectual innovation. These platforms allow users to share knowledge, ask questions, and engage in discussions across a broad spectrum of topics, including philosophy, science, technology, politics, and more. They are often described as knowledge-sharing communities, where individuals contribute content based on their expertise or interests and receive feedback or recognition from others in the community (Kuang et al. 2020)

The integration of monetary incentives and content creator programmes on platforms like Zhihu has also played a role in the evolution of net-philosophy communities, as users now engage in such communities not only for intellectual exchange but also for monetary rewards or social capital. This dynamic adds a layer of marketisation to the knowledge-sharing process, where content creation is motivated by visibility and status¹. While encouraging participation, this shift raises questions about the commodification of knowledge and the potential for shallow intellectual engagement in favour of performative content creation. Nonetheless, these platforms continue to provide crucial spaces for intellectual exploration and radical discourse, despite the constraints imposed by broader political and societal conditions. As Yang (2019) explores, both global Internet trends and local cultural, social, and political contexts influence Chinese online communities. The rise of net philosophy in China can be seen as part of a broader movement of digital intellectualism, where young people engage with philosophy as a way to navigate societal pressures, express individuality, and seek freedom as an alternative to confronting post-millennial youth spiritual crisis². Among the digital pile of debris, we tear out the main features of the net-philosophy community, namely the aestheticisation of knowledge production, the reconstituting of hierarchy and status within the community, the commodification and

¹ <https://daoinsights.com/works/zhihu-chinas-knowledge-platform-taking-quora-to-new-heights/>

² By post-millennial youth spiritual crisis, we mean profound existential challenges confronting individuals born from the late 1990s to early 2000s, a generation grappling with the quest for meaning and identity in an increasingly complex and digitalised landscape. Influenced by rapid technological advancements, such as the pervasive use of social media and instant communication, this cohort navigates a world that often prioritises speedy and provisional connections over deep, meaningful relationships. This crisis reveals a broader struggle to forge a coherent sense of self and purpose amidst the chaos of modern life, marked by an overload of information and competing narratives. As a response to this disorientation, many individuals explore alternative spiritual frameworks, seeking solace in new ideologies, practices, or communities that promise connection and understanding. However, this exploration is often fraught with challenges, as the quest for authenticity and belonging can be hindered by the very digital platforms that facilitate it. The result is a paradox where young people, while connected virtually, experience profound loneliness and isolation.

alienation of knowledge, the depoliticisation of intellectual debates, and the failure of political engagement. We fully understand that net-philosophy in China is much more complex than our understanding, and it operates under a dual pressure of wanting to foster open intellectual exploration and needing to navigate the realities of state surveillance and censorship. These conditions spurred the development of creative forms of resistance and subversive communication strategies and constrained them (Yang and Jiang 2015). These strategies might include using coded language, allegories, or focusing on seemingly apolitical topics with deeper philosophical or political meanings. This surveillance environment has also led to a certain resilience within these communities as they adapt to and sometimes subvert the constraints imposed upon them. Yet, we are not interested in further expounding this dual pressure; instead, we provide a critique of the radical online community internally, hoping to call for more emancipatory politics with reflection. Before engaging in this reflection, it is necessary to understand the historical emergence of net-philosophy in China. The table below presents a timeline of the development of net-philosophy in China.

Period	Key Developments	User Scale	Debate Characteristics
Late 1990s - Early 2000s	Emergence of early digital platforms like BBS, QQ, and Douban.	Small, early Internet adopters (students, intellectuals)	Initial philosophical discussions focused on Marxism and Western ideas
Mid-2000s - 2010s	Development of net-philosophy, postmodernism, and critical theory discourse.	Growing communities, especially students and young workers	Rise of post-Marxism, poststructuralism, radical philosophy debates
2010s	Platforms like Zhihu, WeChat, Weibo spread; censorship intensifies.	Thousands of users from diverse intellectual backgrounds	Ideological fragmentation; ironic, performative debates
2017-2023	Peak in activity, fragmentation, and aestheticisation of knowledge; commodification of philosophy.	Large-scale engagement	Theoretical performance, 'flame wars', and ideological posturing
2023 - Present	Decline in real political engagement; communities fragmented; performative politics dominate.	Reduced user activity and ideological fragmentation	Aestheticised intellectualism and engagement

Table 1: A timeline of the development of net-philosophy in China

3. Approaching Chinese Digital Culture and Net-Philosophy

To approach this net-philosophy community, we adopt an anthropological approach to explore the inner workings of the Chinese net-philosophy community, focusing on how knowledge is created, shared, and validated among its members. By engaging directly with the community through participant observation and in-depth interviews, we aim to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals who navigate this digital subculture. The first author, Zhongkai, joined actively on various digital platforms

popular among the net-philosophy community, such as forums, social media groups, and live discussion platforms. As Kozinets (2015) emphasises in his work on netnography, participant observation in online communities allows researchers to engage directly with the group's activities, providing a nuanced understanding of their interactions and the informal norms that guide their discourse. By immersing in these digital spaces, the researcher was able to observe real-time exchanges, debates, and the community's evolving norms regarding knowledge production and validation.

As for this writing, we joined fifty-one QQ groups, which covered a wide range of topics related to net philosophy and effectively represented the intellectual concerns of left-wing net philosophy communities. These groups engage with diverse issues central to radical thought, including post-Marxism, critical theory, and postmodernism, with a focus on contemporary reinterpretations of Marxist theory and critical readings of capitalism and alienation. Discussions often centre around political philosophy, leftist critiques of neoliberalism, and alternative political systems, while also exploring cultural critique through the lens of the media, popular culture, and digital technology. The groups also address class struggle, labour theory, and incorporate feminist, queer, and ecological perspectives, examining the intersections of gender, sexuality, power, and environmental concerns within contemporary socio-political contexts. These groups provided a fertile ground for observing and even participating in philosophical discussions, debates, and the dissemination of ideas.

Taking a more immersive role as an intellectual activist, Zhongkai became part of a progressive organisation within the radical net-philosophy community known as LC³. As part of LC, Zhongkai took on organisational responsibilities that gave us a closer look at how digital philosophical communities organise events, discussions, and collaborative projects. This role involved coordinating online meetings, facilitating discussions among members, and helping to plan and execute digital events that aimed to foster deeper engagement with philosophical topics. Participating in LC enhanced our understanding of the community's inner workings and allowed us to critically reflect on the roles that leadership and structure play in shaping discourses and debates in digital philosophical communities.

Apart from participant observation, we called meetings among active members of the radical net-philosophy community to reflect on content debates, thematic issues, power relations, credibility, and the writing styles and modes of representation. We also had deep dialogues with the core members of the LC organisation, each playing a pivotal role in organisational tasks and text production. We encouraged self-reflection by sharing personal journeys, motivations for engaging in net philosophy, and thoughts on the nature of knowledge and its role in lives. After all, we also analyse digital artefacts such as discussion threads, social media posts, memes, and shared documents circulating within the community. These artefacts were examined to understand the symbols, references, and language prevalent among members and how philosophical concepts are contextualised and communicated. This zoom-in analysis helped to reveal the implicit rules of engagement and the aesthetic and rhetorical strategies that shape the community's discourses and practices.

4. Practising Alterity on Net-Philosophy Community

The search into the Chinese net-philosophy community opens Pandora's box, bouncing out highly complex and intractable philosophical ideas and debates that

³ All the names, codes, and organisation names used in this article are pseudonyms that are used in order to protect privacy.

attract a new generation of radical youth. We attempt to reveal several critical insights that underscore the unique dynamics and challenges of knowledge exchange in this digital subculture. Yet, let us first reveal the experiences of young enthusiasts who were attracted to the net community. The desire to pursue alternative intellectual praxis on the Internet, among many young people, is driven by a process of disillusionment with the academic system and a belief that philosophy and social theories could solve significant real-world problems. In a deep dialogue with a female student activist, R, commented,

“I, too, went through similar phases with my peers, initially idealising the academic system and believing that philosophy and social theories could solve significant real-world problems. However, over time, I observed that many within academia were primarily concerned with maintaining their own positions or engaging in discussions that seemed largely disconnected from practical impact. This realisation led to a broader sense of disillusionment with the academic approach to knowledge, as it often felt insular and removed from the pressing issues faced by those of us without institutional power or influence”.

Another student, K, echoed R’s view, saying,

“As someone who grew up with very limited exposure to knowledge beyond standardised education, especially in matters related to contemporary systems and societal structures, I felt I had little to no real power to grasp an understanding in the realm of knowledge. When I entered a Social Sciences university, I noticed a common phenomenon: students, including myself, would often go through phases of extreme reactions – either idolising certain ideas and professors, endlessly sharing and endorsing them, or taking the opposite stance of cynicism, where they would reject everything they encountered. This cycle of idealisation and disillusionment seemed pervasive, particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences faculties, where students would either obsessively echo their professors’ views or engage in ‘academic fandom’ behaviours”.

This disillusionment drove the young generation to seek alternatives, leading them to the philosophical discussions they had initially encountered online. R said,

“In the digital spaces of net-philosophy, I found a community where the discussions were not bound by institutional constraints and where the ideas and debates seemed more directly applicable to real-world issues. Compared to the academic environment, net-philosophy offered a space that I felt more accessible and pragmatic, especially for individuals like me who lacked formal authority or deep knowledge of societal power dynamics”.

To many young people like R, the net philosophy communities provided a space of alterity, where philosophical discourse was not merely an abstract exercise but a tool for navigating and making sense of contemporary life, offering insights that felt more immediately relevant and useful.

The emergence of net-philosophy communities reflects a confluence of intellectual curiosity, social dynamics, and the pursuit of alternative spaces for philosophical engagement. By examining the motivations and dynamics of the community members behind their involvement in net philosophy, we confirm that these online spaces, to a

certain extent, like Fuchs' (2014) assertion, digital platforms under certain circumstances can democratise access to information, allowing marginalised voices to participate in knowledge creation. In the context of net-philosophy, the production of knowledge often occurs outside formal academic settings, relying on peer-to-peer interactions, open-access resources, and a shared commitment to exploring complex ideas.

Kozinets (2015) rightly points out that digital subcultures are not just spaces of social gathering but also sites where knowledge is actively constructed and contested, often challenging mainstream or institutionalised forms of expertise. Digital subcultures have become a significant area of study as the Internet increasingly mediates social interaction and knowledge exchange. Subcultures like net-philosophy represent a departure from traditional knowledge communities, characterised by decentralised structures, fluid boundaries, and a blend of serious and playful engagement with intellectual content.

5. The Aestheticisation and Capitalist Alienation of Knowledge

Like the angel of history, the net-philosophy community, by facing the digitalised pile of debris and providing a promising future to the young generation of Chinese radicals, gradually moved in the opposite direction. We critically reveal how, in the alternative intellectual pursuit in a digitalised space, where form and style are prioritised over substance, the synchronisation of ideas and actions leads to the opposite of progressive politics. Reviewing the aestheticisation and alienation of knowledge, we examine the recurrence of establishing authority and status and the implication of aesthetic hierarchies and performative politics on the net community's capacity for meaningful political action.

The net-philosophy community's modes of Internet communication heavily inherit the aesthetic and abstract characteristics of Internet memes. This aestheticisation, while creating a distinct cultural identity, however, leads to the alienation of knowledge. We observed that philosophical discussions often devolve into exchanges of cryptic references and ironic statements, prioritising style over substance. The priority of style not only complicates meaningful engagement but also alienates newcomers who may struggle to penetrate the dense layers of insider jargon and cultural references.

W and R were the core members of a radical net-philosophy group who shared their critical thinking with us. Both disclosed the influence of specific philosophical traditions and figures that had shaped the net-philosophy community, particularly the popularity of thinkers like Lacan, Hegel, and Deleuze. R noted that how individuals engaged with these texts often involved significant misinterpretation, blending personal experiences with philosophical concepts in ways that could be superficial or disconnected from the original ideas. This mode of engagement reflects a broader trend within net-philosophy: the aestheticisation of knowledge, where the value of philosophical discourse lies more in its stylistic and performative aspects than in rigorous intellectual engagement. R commented,

“Many young people adopt a certain posture, just making things up by combining their personal life experiences with exaggerated misinterpretations of the original texts. This is quite common; people do this to create a discussion space where they can argue about all sorts of topics. Some even speak in extensive jargon – I'm not sure if you've ever interacted with such people, like a middle school student reading Deleuze. If you challenge them, they might bombard you with two hours worth of dense text that you can hardly understand a single word of”.

This approach to knowledge exchange is deeply rooted in Internet culture, where discussions frequently resemble the chaotic, adversarial interactions seen on platforms like forums and social media. We recorded an interesting conversation between another two active members of the net community:

Q: But the question is, if you are both talking nonsense, how can the two of you even communicate? For example, if you're reading Hegel and have mastered the terminology of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the other person is reading Deleuze with a grasp of *A Thousand Plateaus*, how do you two communicate?

A: The form of communication is inherited from the Internet forum, like old forum culture or the back-and-forth flame wars.⁴

Q: So, your communication is generally just debating, right? Trying to prove who's right or wrong?

A: To a large extent, yes.

Q: So, it's basically not really the two of you talking, but rather a clash between your respective understandings of Hegel and Deleuze's systems?

A: No, no, that's overestimating it. It was more like each of us was wielding a messy bundle of disjointed and confused terms. The exchanges were more like those on old Internet forums – just mutual insults and chasing each other down over hundreds of posts.

Debates within net-philosophy often devolve into exchanges that are less about meaningful dialogue and more about maintaining a certain posture or attitude, with participants using specialised terminology in ways that may not align with their intended meanings. This form of interaction mirrors Internet subcultures where argumentation is more performative than substantive, focusing on outmanoeuvring opponents rather than engaging in constructive discourse.

A key challenge within net-philosophy is the misalignment of discourses among participants who may be drawing from different philosophical traditions without a shared framework for dialogue. R illustrates this through the example of individuals debating using incompatible terminologies from Hegel and Deleuze, resulting in exchanges that are more about clashing language games than coherent philosophical discussions. The communication style, often marked by irony, sarcasm, and non-verbal cues like tone markers, further complicates genuine engagement, as participants may prioritise the performance of disagreement over the substance of the argument.

⁴ Internet forums, also known as message boards or bulletin boards, emerged in the late 20th century as a primary means of online communication. These platforms allowed users to post messages and respond to others in a hierarchical structure, creating a threaded dialogue. Popular forums such as Usenet, launched in 1980, exemplified this model of communication. Forums were often organised around niche interests and fostered community building but also encouraged debate and sometimes heated disputes, known as "flame wars" – a term used to describe intense, antagonistic exchanges between users (Graham 2005).

This fragmented mode of interaction underscores a broader issue within net-philosophy: the difficulty of achieving meaningful dialogue in a space where the performative and aesthetic dimensions of language often overshadow its communicative functions. The reliance on complex jargon and the absence of a shared interpretive framework can lead to intellectual isolation, where participants are more engaged in parallel monologues than true conversation.

Contrary to the idealised vision of the Internet as a democratising force, such as Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger (2001) argue, net-philosophy's digital spaces are not inherently more democratic and consensual. The absence of traditional intermediaries, such as academic institutions, does not flatten hierarchies. Instead, authority becomes synonymous with knowledge. In the net-philosophy community, those who are perceived as authoritative – whether due to their rhetorical prowess, social capital, or active participation – dominate discussions. However, as members become more familiar with one another, the perceived infallibility of these authorities begins to erode, leading to the collapse of the authority = knowledge equation. Sometimes, this destabilisation can contribute to the fracturing of a small group or community itself, as observed in the repeated cycles of group disintegration and reformation.

The aestheticisation and alienation of knowledge within net-philosophy communities illustrate a profound distortion of intellectual discourse. The prioritisation of style over substance leads not only to superficial debates but also detaches philosophical engagement from its critical potential. This dynamic mirrors David Harvey's critique of postmodernism in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), where he critiques the postmodern turn for favouring form over content, creating a disconnection between intellectual pursuits and material realities.

In net-philosophy communities, the shift towards performative intellectualism, characterised by cryptic references and jargon-heavy exchanges, complicates meaningful engagement and alienates newcomers. Rather than fostering radical political thought, discussions often descend into aestheticised performances, as members use complex terminology to signal intellectual identity rather than to challenge power structures. In *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno (2013) argued that Heidegger's focus on authenticity obscured critical engagement, rendering philosophical discourse more about intellectual posturing than about addressing the real-world conditions of social injustice. Similarly, net-philosophy's reliance on complex jargon and in-group cultural references does not encourage genuine philosophical engagement, but instead fosters a fragmented intellectual environment where language games replace coherent dialogue. Again, the example of debates on Hegel versus Deleuze, as discussed in this paper, highlights this misalignment of discourses – members wield incompatible terminologies to defend intellectual territory rather than to build a shared framework for critique.

6. The Aesthetic Hierarchy of Knowledge

In net-philosophy communities, aesthetic contempt often shapes the hierarchy of knowledge, where the philosopher's choice reflects one's perceived intellectual status. For instance, studying Deleuze is often considered more prestigious than studying Hegel. The moment Hegel is mentioned, there's a tendency to dismiss him contemptuously, labelling him as outdated or irrelevant, and this hostility is directed at anyone who associates with his ideas. L was a frequent visitor to various net-philosophy groups, and he commented,

“Aesthetic contempt in these circles works like this: for example, if I study Deleuze, I consider myself more sophisticated than someone who studies Hegel. The moment you mention Hegel, I’ll dismiss you as a ‘dead dog’ and insult you whenever I see you. This creates an aesthetic hierarchy: at the top tier are figures like Alain Badiou and Deleuze, followed by Derrida and Foucault in the second tier, and then Laclau, Mouffe, and Negri in the third tier”.

This experience crystallises an aesthetic hierarchy within the community: philosophers like Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze occupy the top tier, followed by figures such as Derrida and Foucault in the second tier and thinkers like Laclau, Mouffe, and Negri in the third. Despite these distinctions, a kind of universal disdain applies across the board. It is not uncommon to hear members criticise Hegel, Deleuze, and Foucault equally, rejecting the notion of venerating any philosopher as an untouchable figure. This approach reflects a broader attitude of egalitarian irreverence, where no single thinker is above critique, and all are equally open to being dismissed or debated. This levelling off the field creates an intellectual environment where criticism is the norm, and aesthetic preference dictates the hierarchy more than the content or rigour of the ideas themselves.

Aesthetic preferences in net-philosophy communities are deeply intertwined with identity, status, and group dynamics. These preferences often serve as markers of intellectual prestige, where aligning with certain philosophers, such as Deleuze or Badiou, signals a higher level of sophistication within the community. This choice is not always based on a thorough understanding of the philosophers’ works, but rather on the cultural cachet these figures hold within the group. These aesthetic hierarchies also act as a form of gatekeeping, creating clear boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. Those favouring top-tier philosophers are seen as more legitimate or serious community members, while those associated with lower-tier figures may face disdain or exclusion. This dynamic fosters an environment of exclusivity, where intellectual worth is judged by affiliation rather than genuine engagement with ideas, reinforcing the community’s internal status structures.

Aesthetic contempt within these circles often manifests as performative rebellion, where members distinguish themselves by rejecting revered academic figures. By dismissing philosophers like Hegel with terms like “dead dog”, participants assert their subversive stance against traditional intellectual hierarchies. This irreverence is not just about philosophical disagreement but serves as a personal and cultural statement, aligning individuals with the community’s broader values of critique and scepticism over reverence.

Members who associate themselves with high-status philosophers are often granted more influence and credibility within the group. This influence is not necessarily earned through rigorous debate or substantive contributions but through the perceived prestige of their chosen philosophical alignments. As a result, aesthetic preferences in philosophical allegiance become proxies for social capital, dictating who holds power and authority in discussions. Those at the top of the aesthetic hierarchy wield greater authority, while those who engage with less prestigious figures may struggle to gain the same level of respect or influence.

This dynamic leads to a form of aestheticised knowledge where authority is less about expertise and more about the symbolic value of one’s philosophical stance. It reflects a broader trend within net-philosophy communities where the performance of intellectualism often outweighs genuine engagement with ideas. The consequence is a community where knowledge is not just about understanding but about maintaining

and displaying the right aesthetic choices, consolidating one's authority and status within the group.

7. The Class Background and Cultural Capital of Net Participants

An interesting observation is that the aesthetic hierarchy was colluded with class diversity and social stratification within the net-philosophy community. As an active member of a net-philosophy group, R was responsible for planning and organising various activities. After a long period of participation, she offered an insightful account of class diversity and social stratification within net-philosophy circles:

“I noticed a diverse range of participants from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Some came from rural areas and studied in county-level schools, often having to return to their rural homes regularly. On the other hand, there were also the ‘second-generation academics’, whose parents were university professors, representing a much more privileged background. This diversity highlighted the wide spectrum of social classes in these communities”.

R describes the community as comprising individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, including students from rural areas, children of professors, and various other socioeconomic strata. This diversity creates a complex social landscape where different levels of access to cultural and social capital influence participants' engagement with philosophical discourse. Within this environment, core members often demonstrate their intellectual capabilities through contributions like writing essays or thought pieces. In these circles, writing was an essential way to showcase one's thinking abilities and gain recognition, especially for those having little or no social and cultural capital due to their class background. Knowledge means authority.

R also emphasised a common experience among newcomers: a sense of inadequacy and intimidation when first encountering the specialised language and dense jargon prevalent in these discussions. “My initial feeling was intense inadequacy, like I didn't know anything. I saw others constantly talking and using jargon, but I understood none. My first impression was that I seemed like the dumbest person there”, R said. Many newcomers initially remain silent, absorbing the community's language and norms before gradually finding their voice. This process underscores a broader pattern within net-philosophy: using complex, often convoluted language as both a barrier to entry and a marker of insider status, which can perpetuate a cycle of intellectual gatekeeping.

We further confirm that within the net-philosophy community, a distinct aesthetic hierarchy exists and dictates the acceptance and preference of knowledge. This hierarchy does not necessarily align with the intrinsic value or accuracy of the knowledge but is influenced by the perceived cultural capital of specific philosophical figures and ideas. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital, we found that participants are more likely to engage with ideas that carry a certain aesthetic prestige or are associated with famous intellectual figures rather than engaging with the content on its merit. This aesthetic hierarchy within the net-philosophy community functions like a “great chain of being”⁵, indelibly etched into the minds of young

⁵ Lovejoy explores the historical development of the Great Chain of Being from ancient times through the Middle Ages and into the early modern period, tracing its influence on Western thought (Lovejoy 1936). Just as the Great Chain established a fixed hierarchy of beings, the aesthetic hierarchy in online philosophical circles creates an entrenched

participants. Similar to Bourdieu's concept of social capital, this hierarchy orders philosophical figures and ideas along a perceived ladder of prestige and cultural significance rather than their intellectual merit or truth value. The hierarchy is not merely a ranking of knowledge but a deeply ingrained structure that influences how individuals within the community perceive and engage with philosophical content.

This "great chain of being" operates almost unconsciously, guiding participants to favour certain ideas or figures seen as more culturally prestigious or fashionable. It reflects a symbolic order that dictates what is considered valuable or worthy of attention. This stratification imprints itself on the youth within the community, shaping their intellectual landscape and subtly directing their philosophical pursuits. As a result, the pursuit of philosophical knowledge becomes less about a genuine quest for understanding and more about aligning with the aesthetic preferences and social signals that dominate the community. In this way, the aesthetic hierarchy not only influences knowledge exchange but also perpetuates a form of intellectual conformity, where the valuation of ideas is driven by cultural aesthetics rather than critical engagement or intellectual rigour.

8. Aestheticisation of Politics

The political tendencies within radical net-philosophy are often aestheticised, functioning as extensions of the broader aesthetic hierarchies identified above. Rather than a coherent political ideology, the community's political expressions are frequently performative and symbolic, reflecting the aesthetic preferences of its members. This finding echoes the arguments of Fuchs (2014) on the aestheticisation of political movements in digital spaces, where political engagement becomes more about identity and style than substantive action. In the net-philosophy context, this aestheticisation manifests as a selective appropriation of leftist rhetoric and imagery, which is more about signalling cultural alignment than active political commitment.

We encountered W, a core member of a net-leftist group who shared his personal journey and said,

"I saw myself as someone who casually engaged with philosophy at the beginning. I believed that philosophy circles were essentially a higher-level extension of keyboard politics and literary circles, with significant overlap between keyboard politics, net-philosophy, and other similar communities. As more people joined, many started to adopt leftist labels, feeling that it fulfilled their desire for rebellion and offered a way to take collective action."

W's perspective provides a critical view of the net-philosophy community as an extension of other online subcultures, such as political commentary circles ("keyboard politics") and literary circles. Initially, W considered himself a casual participant, viewing philosophy as a higher form of these intersecting communities. Over time, as more individuals joined, W observed that the community began to adopt leftist identities, not necessarily as a commitment to a coherent political ideology but as a

ranking system that mirrors Bourdieu's concept of social capital. In this system, philosophical figures and ideas are valued not solely for their intellectual merit or truth, but rather for their perceived cultural prestige and status within the community. This hierarchy thus operates as a symbolic structure that shapes engagement with philosophical discourse, subtly reinforcing distinctions in power, legitimacy, and influence.

symbolic stance of rebellion. For many members, this rebellion is performative – a posture rather than a profoundly reflective critique of the world. W noted,

“These individuals are like privileged kids living in modern, comfortable lifestyles who can’t understand why their parents act the way they do. These parents often fail to provide sufficient social and aesthetic fulfilment for their children, leading the latter to unconsciously project their frustrations onto society as a whole, treating the community as their home and the act of participating in these circles as a mere outlet for venting”.

We shared W’s observations, which highlight a critical tension within net-philosophy: the adoption of political and philosophical stances more as acts of role-play or personal expression than as genuine commitments to transformative action. According to W, the community “over time began to enact their political fantasies through role-playing in keyboard politics, akin to small clubs in Russia. If you call them leftists, I don’t quite agree; I believe they are fundamentally right-wing”.

Perhaps a label of “right-wing” would be too harsh for these young people. However, “performativity” of actions that are essentially theatrical and aimed at displaying or staging one’s identity and political alignments rather than fostering tangible change. These actions are performative because they are about enacting or “performing” roles in a public or communal setting, often in ways that are visible and intended for recognition by others. In digital spaces, this can manifest as participants adopting certain political stances or jargon that align with group norms or signal in-group membership but without the commitment to the more profound political ideologies or activities that these stances would traditionally imply.

In this online community, a self-proclaimed left-wing philosopher, Z, initially advocated for radical leftist ideas and actively encouraged the formation of student groups. However, as these groups became increasingly radicalised, leading to actions that could potentially cause political or legal consequences, he quickly distanced himself from them. In a bid for self-preservation, Z not only severed ties with these radical organisations but also began to frequently report other left-wing knowledge practitioners and content creators to the government, aiming to suppress leftist media outlets similar to his own.

This behaviour not only shielded Z from government interference but also created a tacit collusion with the authorities, allowing him to gain more power and influence within the leftist community. At the same time, this betrayal of radical ideas led to factionalism within the community, weakening solidarity and increasing divisions among members. Z then shifted towards monetising his platform, leveraging his influence to sell products. This consumerist behaviour directly contradicted the anti-capitalist rhetoric he had previously espoused, further exposing the deep contradictions between his ideology and practice.

Z’s case illustrates a complex phenomenon: when faced with political pressure or the lure of personal gain, some individuals who initially claim radical positions may choose to collude with the government, betraying their original political stance and even turning against other groups that share similar left-wing ideologies.

“Aesthetic” expressions represent or substitute for broader ideas or movements without necessarily leading to direct action. In net-philosophy context, aesthetic expressions might include specific images, slogans, or references that evoke particular political ideologies (like leftist rhetoric) but are primarily used to establish a persona or

align with a group's aesthetic. These symbols serve more as markers of identity and cultural alignment than as tools for political activism or engagement.

This aestheticisation of political tendencies within the net-philosophy community miraculously aligns with the Chinese government's control over the Internet, creating a form of subconscious complicity. By emphasising style, performativity, and symbolic gestures over substantive political engagement, the community's approach to politics inadvertently dovetails with the state's preference for depoliticised discourse that avoids direct challenges to authority.

In this context, the role of intellectuals like Z becomes particularly interesting. The commodification, aestheticisation, and symbolic performance of intellectual identity serve not only as a means of cultural distinction but also as a mechanism of self-preservation. By reducing their political engagement to a set of consumable symbols, intellectuals like Z can maintain their status and influence without directly confronting or challenging state power. This "consumption" of intellectual identity through symbolic gestures effectively neutralises the political potency of their ideas, making them safe within an environment that discourages genuine activism.

9. Aestheticised Knowledge as a Form of Media: Knowledge Capitalism

We are saddened to point out further that the aestheticisation of knowledge in the Chinese net philosophy contributes to a more insidious form of media – knowledge capitalism. G, another influential figure in the net-philosophy community, sought to establish himself as a unique philosophical figure through various digital platforms. His self-styled "philosophical" work, illustrates how individuals in the digital age can construct personas and intellectual identities, not through traditional academic pathways but via online subcultures. This path reflects broader anthropological themes, such as the creation of authority in decentralised spaces, the role of performative intellectualism, and the intersection of consumerism and ideology in shaping digital identities.

As Huws (2014) and Fuchs (2011) highlight, the commodification of digital content transforms knowledge into a marketable asset, where value is derived not from the content itself but from its aesthetic presentation and cultural appeal. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in the net-philosophy community, as the emphasis on style and presentation often overshadows substantive engagement with philosophical ideas. This commodification of knowledge as aesthetic capital reinforces existing power structures and perpetuates the alienation of knowledge from its original context and purpose.

This phenomenon goes beyond the simple commodification of knowledge- It represents the internal capitalist transformation – alienation – of knowledge itself. Marx's theory of alienation offers a valuable lens for understanding the commodification of knowledge within the net-philosophy community, as it highlights how knowledge becomes alienated in four dimensions. First, alienation from the product occurs when knowledge is detached from its original purpose of critical inquiry and philosophical exploration, transforming instead into a consumable product that prioritises packaging and marketability. Second, alienation from the process arises when knowledge creation is driven by aesthetic norms and market demands, leading scholars and participants to focus on style over substance, thereby disconnecting them from the genuine intellectual engagement that initially motivated their involvement. Third, alienation from others is seen in the transactional nature of interactions within the community, where the exchange of aesthetically appealing knowledge overshadows collaborative philosophical inquiry, fostering individualistic pursuits of

recognition rather than shared intellectual development. Lastly, alienation from one's potential manifests when participants are unable to fully realise their intellectual capacities due to the pressures of conforming to commercial and aesthetic demands, stifling the pursuit of genuine knowledge and critical thinking in favour contributions that are more commodifiable but less profound.

Let's analyse one by one and illustrate how a famous net philosopher, G, embodies the four layers of alienation of knowledge production:⁶

Alienation from the Product: G's transformation of his philosophical ideas into content primarily intended for shock value and entertainment exemplifies alienation from the original purpose of philosophical inquiry. His core philosophy, epitomised by the slogan "Create Yourself", has been reduced to a series of catchphrases and memes that circulate within online communities. This commodification detaches his original ideas from their intended context, converting them into consumable digital artefacts.

Alienation from the Process: G's content creation appears driven more by the need to gain popularity and maintain relevance within the "vulgar" community than genuine philosophical exploration. Despite initial ridicule, his strategic alignment with vulgar subcultures reflects a shift in focus from authentic engagement to fulfilling his audience's aesthetic and performative expectations. This shift highlights a disconnect from the original intellectual motivations, aligning instead with the community's desire for spectacle and controversy.

Alienation from Others: G's relationship with his audience is largely transactional, revolving around providing entertainment through aestheticising his ideas. His increasing reliance on the approval and mockery from the "vulgar" community underscores a performative dynamic where interactions are based on superficial engagement with his "creation" concepts rather than substantive philosophical discourse. This dynamic fosters a form of alienation where G's philosophical identity becomes a tool for amusement rather than serious dialogue.

Alienation from One's Potential: G's potential as a philosopher is overshadowed by his entanglement in a subculture that prioritises entertainment over intellectual rigour. The focus on maintaining visibility through controversial statements and behaviour, such as engaging in conflicts on platforms like Bilibili, illustrates how the pressures of digital capitalism – manifesting as a need for constant content production and audience engagement – limit the ability to pursue deeper philosophical inquiries. Instead, intellectual pursuits are reduced to performative acts that satisfy the aesthetic demands of his audience.

G, as a self-proclaimed "cyber intellectual", exemplifies what can be described as capitalist schizophrenia, a concept rooted in the contradictions between ideological purity and market-driven self-promotion. As a "cyber philosopher", G presents himself as a radical agent of change, ostensibly opposing established systems of power, including capitalism, militarism, and nationalism. The aestheticisation of his intellectual identity reflects the capitalist schizophrenia of the cyber intellectual: the tension between his desire for revolutionary change and the reality of participating in and benefiting from a system that rewards performance over substance. G's intellectual project, therefore, serves not as a transformative political force but as a spectacle, where radicalism is reduced to symbolic gestures, ultimately reinforcing the capitalist dynamics of visibility, competition, and self-promotion.

⁶ See <https://xyrxyrxyr.org/%E7%BD%91%E5%93%B2%E9%BB%91%E8%AF%9D>, accessed on 29 September 2024.

10. Reflection on a Net-Leftist Group Praxis: Failure of Political Engagement

Our final reflection primarily relied on the first author's experience with a specific radical net-philosophy community, LC. Our involvement with LC provided a first-hand look into the dynamics of online philosophical engagement, where intellectual exploration often intertwines with social interaction and identity formation. LC served as a microcosm of the broader net-philosophy landscape, reflecting the unique challenges and characteristics of the digital subculture.

In the initial phases of net-philosophy communities, activities were largely unstructured, emphasising casual interaction rather than focused or severe practice. A common phenomenon during this period was the so-called "Internet expeditions", where members would rally to criticise or attack individuals online who were perceived as foolish or misguided. This behaviour was indicative of the community's early engagement style – spontaneous, reactionary, and often more about the thrill of collective action than about any meaningful intellectual pursuit or political agenda.

These early interactions were characterised by a lack of attention to the members' real-life backgrounds or socioeconomic conditions. Discussions rarely delved into participants' personal realities. Instead, they revolved around abstract debates and mutual jesting. Even though there were aspirations to use leftist philosophy as a tool for real-world change, the community's activities remained largely superficial until the end of 2022. Most members were content with banter and theoretical posturing rather than engaging in substantive or practical efforts.

10.1. Attempts to Structure Real-World Engagement

Despite the general lack of seriousness, some attempts were made at the beginning of 2023 to steer the group towards more meaningful engagement. As an organiser, R endeavoured to promote more structured activities, such as writing collaborative articles or fostering discussions that connected philosophical ideas to everyday life challenges. The goal was to move beyond the virtual space and encourage members to articulate their thoughts on topics like our video content or broader social issues. However, these efforts often fell short, as the community's informal nature made it difficult to cultivate a sustained, collective focus on practical outcomes.

L commented,

"Honestly, I don't know what others were thinking, but I remember that I wanted to take things a bit more seriously. For example, I tried to look into other people's ideas and understand the different challenges they faced in their lives. For me, this was the first step towards taking things more seriously because, after all, it wasn't just about pure philosophy. The label we used was leftist philosophy, which fundamentally involves a kind of materialism and addresses class issues. So, I initially thought of making the group's interactions more grounded in real life. I attempted to do this through our QQ group, but, to be honest, it wasn't very successful."

Around this time, there was a growing interest in the community to ground its activities in a leftist framework. For some members, this represented a serious attempt to transition from purely theoretical discussions to more tangible actions that addressed class and material conditions. We saw this as the beginning of a more committed phase, where the group could leverage its philosophical leanings to engage with real-world problems. The leftist label was not just a philosophical stance but an aspiration to apply materialist and class-conscious perspectives in practice. However, the

transition from online discourse to actionable steps proved challenging, as many members remained entrenched in the comfort of abstract debates.

Despite initial enthusiasm, the efforts to create deeper connections and foster a more serious approach often faltered. The digital medium itself posed barriers to meaningful engagement, as the casual, chat-based format of QQ⁷ did not lend itself well to the sustained, earnest collaboration required for real-world action. Many participants were content with remaining within the realm of theoretical discussions, showing little inclination to delve into the lived experiences of others or to form cohesive, action-oriented communities.

K reflected,

“The QQ group format turned out to be quite ineffective, and I only realised this after trying it out myself. I approached the Internet with a serious mindset, but I found that the Internet, and especially platforms like QQ groups, isn’t conducive to serious engagement. It’s challenging to get people within these groups to be truly earnest. The nature of the medium means that most participants are just casually chatting without much depth. There’s little interest in genuinely understanding each other’s lives, making significant changes in their own lives, or forming a real sense of community. Through my practical attempts, I found that achieving these goals in such a setting is very difficult”.

By 2023, there was a noticeable decline in the popularity of philosophical debates within philosophy communities. This was partly due to the transient nature of online subcultures, where interests can quickly shift and burn out. The ease of access to philosophical texts and the low cost of participation meant that many members eventually lost interest, finding the initial novelty had worn off. Influential figures within the community began advocating for a shift towards more practical, real-world engagement. Radical net-philosophy community members thus moved beyond theoretical discussions and participated in activities such as charity work, using platforms like personal online shops to initiate community-driven efforts.

This period marked a turning point in many groups’ focus, which expanded from abstract philosophical discourse to exploring how leftist principles could be applied in tangible ways. Members began organising local meet-ups and forming small clubs focused on community service and social action. However, these initiatives also faced significant challenges, as the enthusiasm for real-world practice was not uniformly shared across the group. The gap between philosophical ideals and practical implementation often led to disillusionment and disagreements within the community.

The push towards practical engagement revealed deeper issues within the group, particularly around leadership and decision-making. Attempts to organise collective actions often floundered due to a lack of clear vision and the differing priorities of key members. For instance, disputes arose over resource allocation, leadership roles, and the execution of initiatives, reflecting broader tensions between the community’s ideological aspirations and the practical realities of organising.

⁷ QQ is a very popular Chinese messaging app and serves as the primary platform for many net-philosophy communities. Known for its wide range of features including group chats, file sharing, and forums, QQ has become a central hub for these groups to gather, discuss, and exchange ideas. Its accessibility and versatility make it an ideal space for these digital subcultures, allowing users to easily connect and engage in philosophical discourse. For many in the net-philosophy community, QQ is more than just a messaging app – it’s a crucial part of their social and intellectual landscape

10.2. The Failure of Political Practice

Within the net-philosophy community LC, multiple issues and conflicts emerged during their attempts at practical engagement, ultimately leading to the failure of their projects. The efforts of political practice were hampered by a lack of precise planning and direction. Meetings were often dominated by lengthy, technical discussions led by B, a core member, which many found incomprehensible and unhelpful. In particular, B suggested setting up a company to provide a cover for the community practices, focusing heavily on legal details and formalities. However, his approach was poorly received because many members lacked a basic understanding of economic and social relations, making his discussions on legal intricacies irrelevant and inaccessible. This development led to frustration among the group, as they felt that B was out of touch with the everyday realities and concerns of the average member. This disconnect highlighted chaotic and inexperienced leadership, the broader problem of mismatched priorities within the group, and the lack of democratic coordination and leadership.

Scepticism about the group's potential for success resulted, with some seeing LC as merely a casual gathering rather than a seriously unified effort. A meeting was called in an attempt to generate consensus on community practices, but it ended up revealing deep divisions, with power struggles and covert plots to exclude dissenting voices, such as attempts to remove members who opposed the direction of the group. These internal conflicts and lack of genuine collaboration underscored the inability of LC to function as a cohesive and democratic organisation. Ultimately, a vote on whether to continue the group saw many members opting out, leaving only a few who insisted on continuing, but the momentum was lost as the majority had already walked away, leading to the group's dissolution.

In LC, genuine organisational issues were often replaced by political labels and theoretical stances that often served as a means of identity expression rather than a commitment to concrete action. This approach mirrors the aesthetic hierarchies within the group, where the value of philosophical engagement was frequently judged by style and presentation rather than depth or rigour. Members often engaged in debates and discussions not necessarily to arrive at a more profound understanding or to effect change but to perform their philosophical affiliations in a way that was seen as culturally or intellectually prestigious. This performative nature of engagement created a culture where the appearance of engagement often outweighed actual practice, with political and philosophical stances becoming more about signalling identity than any actionable commitment to change.

This performative approach failed to transform the theoretical equation of knowledge = authority into practical influence or leadership within the group. The emphasis on aestheticised expressions of knowledge created a superficial layer of authority lacking the foundation of genuine understanding and actionable intent. As a result, the group's efforts at organising and mobilising around shared philosophical or political goals were stymied by a disconnect between the performative nature of their engagement and the practical demands of real-world action, as well as the lack of democratic organisational culture able to navigate different opinions and views and to accommodate the relearning of the problematic leadership. This failure underscores the limitations of a community built on aesthetic hierarchies and performative engagement, as well as insufficient democratic organisational culture and practice, highlighting the need for a more grounded and substantive approach to knowledge and authority, democratic organisation, and solidarity in digital philosophical spaces.

11. Concluding Remarks

Our study underscores how the aestheticisation of knowledge within net-philosophy communities leads to a deeper, more pervasive issue: a post-millennial youth spiritual crisis. This crisis is epitomised by a disconnect between the search for meaningful intellectual engagement and the commodification of that pursuit into a consumable and aesthetically pleasing form. The communities that were intended to be spaces of shared intellectual and spiritual exploration have instead become arenas where knowledge is stripped of its transformative potential and repackaged as a form of cultural capital.

In these net-philosophy spaces, the intellectual figure is often idealised, not for their contributions to understanding or action, but for their adherence to certain aesthetic standards. This community feature creates a scenario where the role of the intellectual is less about challenging the status quo or engaging deeply with complex ideas and more about performing a culturally approved identity. The intellectual becomes another symbol in the aesthetic economy of knowledge capitalism, further distancing the community from genuine engagement with the material conditions of knowledge production and consumption.

This leads to a process of depoliticisation in the net-philosophy community by which political discourse, actions, and spaces are stripped of their meaningful engagement with power structures, reducing complex social and political issues to mere technical or administrative matters. It involves the removal or diminishment of public and collective agency in political decision-making, often relegating what were once politically charged topics to private or individual concerns. In digital spaces like net-philosophy groups, depoliticisation manifests as a shift from substantive engagement with political theories and ideologies to superficial, aesthetic, or performative expressions that lack real political commitment or transformative potential.

Echoing Buller's (2019) and Kettell's (2008) studies, depoliticisation means that engagement with leftist ideas or revolutionary theories often stops short of genuine political commitment or action. Instead, these ideas are appropriated as part of an aesthetic experience that lacks the urgency and rigour of genuine political engagement. The net-philosophy community reflects this broader societal trend: while members may espouse radical or transformative ideas, their practice remains primarily confined to the realm of discourse, devoid of the actionable steps necessary to confront and alter the structures they critique.

In China, the state's pervasive control over the Internet, including censorship and surveillance, significantly influences how political discourse is conducted online. The Chinese government's emphasis on maintaining social stability and its crackdown on dissenting voices create an environment where overt political engagement is fraught with risk. As a result, many online communities, including those focused on philosophy, may self-censor or avoid direct political confrontation, contributing to the broader trend of depoliticisation.

Moreover, the influence of market forces in China's rapidly expanding digital economy plays a critical role in shaping these communities. The commodification of knowledge as aesthetic capital aligns with broader capitalist dynamics, where the value of content is often judged by its marketability rather than its intellectual or political substance. This process reinforces existing hierarchies and diminishes the potential for net-philosophy communities to serve as spaces for critical engagement and activism.

But can this be understood as a failure of re-politicisation? This study suggests that what might have been an opportunity for re-politicisation within the net-philosophy

communities has instead resulted in a retreat into aesthetics and consumerism. The intended political engagement has largely failed to materialise, subsumed under the weight of aesthetic performance and the commodification of knowledge, not to mention the lack of democratic organisational culture and behaviour. While the communities could have served as platforms for genuine political discourse and action, they have instead become spaces where political commitment is sidelined in favour of aesthetic appeal. Thus, the crisis is not just one of depoliticisation but also a failure to reassert a meaningful political praxis in the face of market forces and cultural consumption.

Finally, the aestheticisation of knowledge has contributed to the implosion of leftist knowledge systems within these communities. By transforming revolutionary ideas into commodities within a capitalist framework, the foundational principles of leftist theory – critique of capital, advocacy for the proletariat, and materialist analysis – are diluted. This implosion reflects a broader failure of these communities to transgress the capitalist structures they critique, as their practices often replicate the very dynamics of commodification and alienation they seek to oppose. The result is a hollowing out of leftist thought, reducing it to marketable aesthetics rather than a robust framework for understanding and changing the world.

In light of this crisis, we may not have good suggestions, but we emphasise a concept of *commoning* or *commonwealth* to accommodate diverse subjectivities and capacities and create new forms of social cooperation and political agency through shared, networked intelligence – what Hardt and Negri (2009) term mass intellectuality or general intellect. The notion of commoning offers a crucial framework for understanding how communities, even in the hyper-commercialised spaces of the Internet, can reassert political agency and create alternative modes of leadership and organisation (Hardt and Negri 2017).

By engaging in practices that prioritise cooperation and shared production of knowledge, net-philosophy communities could reclaim their potential as spaces for genuine intellectual and political engagement. This would entail shifting away from the individualised and commodified performance of intellectual identity and instead embracing collective knowledge production that challenges capitalist structures of alienation and consumption. The path forward requires a repoliticisation that is rooted in collective agency and cooperation and regrounded massive participants as forging leadership. Repoliticisation in radical net-philosophy communities would involve a conscious effort to move beyond performative engagement with leftist ideas and towards a practice of shared intellectual labour aimed at disrupting capitalist forms of knowledge commodification. The repoliticisation of radical net-philosophy could be facilitated by fostering more democratic structures within these communities, where intellectual contributions are not simply consumed but actively built upon in a *commoning* and iterative process.

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