Inclusion, Participation and the Emergence of British Chinese websites

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The marginalization of the British Chinese

In previous work we have drawn attention to the relative absence of British Chinese voices in public culture (Parker 1995; Song 1999). No one is more aware of this invisibility than British-born Chinese people themselves. Since 2000 the emergence of Internet discussion sites produced by British Chinese young people has provided an important forum for many British-born Chinese to grapple with questions concerning their identities, experiences, and status in Britain.

In this paper we explore the ways in which Internet usage by British-born Chinese people has facilitated a) forms of self-expression and forms of collective identity production; and b) forms of social and political action.[i] This examination of British Chinese websites raises important questions about inclusion and exclusion, citizenship, participation and the development of a sense of belonging in Britain. These issues are usually overlooked in relation to a group which appears to be well integrated and successful in higher education.

Unlike the South Asian and African Caribbean populations in Britain, whose cultural and political presence is undeniably felt in Britain, there are hardly any references to British Chinese people in mainstream cultural and political life. One reason for this is that the British Chinese are a numerically smaller group. Estimates of the Chinese population in Britain vary. According to the Office of National Statistics, the Chinese comprise 0.4% of the total population – about 247,000 (ONS 2005), of whom 38% are aged 16-34 (ONS 2002). The true figure is likely to be considerably higher, because many recent migrants from mainland China are undocumented and work in the Chinese informal economy. One Chinese organization, Min Quan, suggests that the total population is more likely to be around 400,000.

The dominant image of Chinese people in Britain stems from their long-standing presence in most cities and neighbourhoods running restaurants and take-away businesses. New Chinese migrants have also recently received attention as vulnerable and exploited undocumented workers, in the aftermath of the 58 Chinese people suffocated in a truck in Dover in 2000 and the death of 23 Chinese cockle pickers at Morecambe Bay in 2004.

While many Chinese people still run such ethnic catering businesses (especially new Chinese migrants to the UK), this image of the Chinese is increasingly dated, given the increasing diversification of the British Chinese population as a whole. Research suggests that many second generation British Chinese are now young adults, are highly regarded by their teachers (Francis and Archer 2005), and have entered into higher education and mainstream professional jobs (Modood et al. 1997). More than twice the proportion of 18-24 year old Britons of African, Chinese, and Indian heritage attend university than do

White Britons, and the Chinese (unlike other minority ethnic groups) are well represented in the more prestigious 'old' universities in Britain (Modood 2004: 89-90).

In comparison with the African Caribbean and South Asian populations in Britain (and in particular Asian Muslims in recent years), the Chinese in Britain are regarded as an unproblematic and quiescent group, and it is largely assumed that British Chinese have successfully integrated into British society. But is this actually the case?

While some degree of social inclusion can be achieved through the workings of higher education and the market (and in the case of the first generation Chinese, this has meant through small businesses in ethnic catering), the concentration of the first generation in a racialized small business sector will shape the development of the British Chinese population for decades to come (Chau & Yu 2001). A survey by *The Guardian* newspaper in early 2005 revealed the low level of 'integration' among Chinese people, who reportedly felt the least British among all minority groups in Britain (Pai, *The Guardian Unlimited* web site, 19th October 2005 available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/china/story/0,,1595480,00.html).

Although aggregate statistics suggest that the Chinese in Britain are a success, there are real limits to what socioeconomic indicators can tell us about inclusion and participation in the wider society, as revealed in the Internet discussions outlined below – which are, generally speaking, dominated by young, highly educated British Chinese. We argue in this article that capturing minority peoples' sense of inclusion and participation in society is elusive, and a sense of belonging cannot simply be extrapolated from high achievement in education and the labour market (Song 2003). ***Furthermore, a more real and substantive social integration, in which British Chinese engage with both mainstream society and other minority ethnic groups, may only emerge from a more robust and collective sense of second generation ethnic identity. The development of the social agenda necessary for subsequent political participation is, we argue, facilitated by the primarily coethnic interactions occurring on British Chinese Internet websites.***

This article addresses two key questions: How are ethnic identities shaped by the communicative practices and social networks developed in these Internet forums? Does participation on these British Chinese sites enable new forms of participation and offer evidence of an emergent "second generation" civil society? In addressing these questions, we focus specifically upon the most widely used British Chinese website, www.britishbornchinese.org.uk and to a lesser extent, www.dimsum.co.uk.

This study is based on reading and analyzing the content of these two sites since their inception. In addition to face to face interviews with these sites' editors, we have posted short questionnaires to participants, asking them to explain what their use of British Chinese websites means to them. We quote from some of the 30 responses we have received (by email) from them, as well as from various discussion threads over the past several years. **A distinctive character of the online exchanges on these websites is their spontaneous and anonymous nature. Some discussion threads receive hundreds of replies while others receive very few. While we have been unable,**

systematically, to follow every thread in every discussion forum on various British Chinese websites, we have tried to illustrate what are the typical sorts of exchanges (both in terms of substantive topics and the tone and language of these exchanges) we found in the myriad discussion forums.

(I think we need a bit more caution about "typicality" here, partly because we haven't done quantitative content analysis, mainly because the selection here is only typical of the more "thoughtful" discussion threads e.g in the speaker's corner and ID parade threads of the bbc.org.uk forum
so perhaps say something like we've deliberately focused on the more serious threads, and mention that the informal banter surrounding these messages provides the context in which such more serious debates can occur – the site users themselves over the last year or two feel the bbc site has gone downhill in terms of quality, although we shouldn't mention this in the article, it's important to bear in mind that most of the messages are quite banal, jokey, cliquey)

Civil society and the Internet as public sphere

There are now a considerable number of diasporic minority websites, originating in Britain (see, for example, **www.barficulture.com** – a British South Asian site), and which are widely used by minority second generation Britons (see Parker & Song, forthcoming 2006). Communication through the Internet connects scattered populations in previously unimagined ways both across and within national boundaries (Franklin 2003; Graham & Khosravi 2002). As both transport and communications have become faster and more affordable, a diverse array of migrants have developed forms of community and identity connecting places of residence and family ancestry in novel combinations (Parham 2004; Levitt 2001). In fact, some analysts, such as Appadurai (1996), refer to the ways in which 'everyday subjectivities' are transformed by the creation of 'diasporic public spheres' arising from participation on these Internet websites. *(are the single quotation marks necessary?)*

If "electronic media have become the privileged space of politics" (Castells 1997: 311) then an exploration of the how ethnic minorities are making use of new media is an essential element in assessing their participation in contemporary society. The early enthusiasm for the political possibilities of the Internet has given way to a more sceptical tone, highlighting its susceptibility to commercialisation and fragmentation (Sunstein 2001; Pajnik 2005). Yet this necessary corrective to unbounded cyber-optimism may overlook the significant everyday forms of social connection afforded by these new communications technologies (Siapera 2005).

This danger is especially marked when considering the repertoire of social action open to groups - such as second generation Chinese people in Britain - without a long tradition of representation in politics, mainstream media or social research. In the 2005 British General Election campaign no candidates for either of the two main political parties came

from a British born Chinese background.[ii] The standard portraits of ethnic minorities in Britain largely ignore their experiences.

The majority of the first generation of Chinese arrived in Britain between the 1960s and 70s, and most of them set up Chinese take-away and restaurant businesses in remote villages, as well as in suburban and metropolitan areas. As a result, the Chinese are extremely geographically dispersed (Dorling & Thomas 2004), and many second generation Chinese have grown up in Britain with little or no contact with other British Chinese who have shared very similar backgrounds in terms of their participation in an immigrant family economy (Song 1999). In contrast to other minorities, British Chinese have lacked the unifying forces of a shared religion or a British based popular cultural form to mark out a distinctive public profile.

In this context the development of Internet sites which address and reflect the lives of Chinese people brought up in Britain is significant. They offer the first widely accessible public platforms for the articulation of British Chinese viewpoints. The emergence of web sites like www.britishbornchinese.org.uk and www.dimsum.co.uk may be a sign of a growing, specifically "second generation" civil society of institutions reflecting the experiences of British born young people who do not feel catered for by the community organisations established by their parents' generation in the post-war decades.

The proliferation of associational opportunities offered by the Internet – blogs, chatrooms, discussion forums, instant messaging, web sites – has prompted discussions of a networked civil society (Barney 2004; Hassan 2004; Ester and Vinken 2003). To these authors the Internet "provides an appropriate material support for the diffusion of networked individualism as the dominant form of sociability" (Castells 2001: 131). Networked individualism comprises person to person contact, often over long distances, which in the context of the Internet has the potential to "offer a new kind of informal public space" as a source of information and emotional support (Misztal 2000: 196; Wellman and Hogan 2004).

A focus on the individualising logic of on-line communication, and the tendency for narrowly defined interest groups and identities to engage in self-contained "enclave deliberation" (Sunstein 2001) may overlook innovative ways of addressing and mobilising collective experiences through Internet forums. This is particularly significant for a spatially dispersed group like British Chinese young people. An important question over the years ahead is whether new on-line forums can develop into enduring social institutions.

In this article we address these issues through analysis of the two of the most widely used British Chinese Internet sites, **www.britishbornchinese.org.uk** – referred to as the British Born Chinese site in the remainder of this paper – and www.dimsum.co.uk, hereafter referred to as "Dimsum".

British Chinese web sites

The British Born Chinese site began in autumn 1999 as an offshoot of an existing web site, Chinatown Online (**www.chinatown-online.co.uk**). One of the British Born Chinese site founders, Steve Lau, had established Chinatown Online to introduce Chinese culture and food in Britain to what he presumed would be a mainly non-Chinese audience. In fact many of Chinatown Online's users were British-born Chinese, who urged the creation of a site specifically geared toward their experiences. In response the British Born Chinese site was formed. The home page of the site reflects its founding purpose as a realm for free discussion:

> The idea of the site is to provide a forum in which British Born Chinese can share experiences, ideas and thoughts. There are two core purposes to this site. The first is empowerment. A common experience of the British Born Chinese is the need to balance our cultural heritage with the daily reality of living in Britain. Through sharing our experiences we hope to develop a stronger sense of identity, answer those questions we have always wondered about and provide inspiration. The logical conclusion of all this is that people participate - our second core purpose. (www.britishbornchinese.org.uk/pages/about.html)

Although the homepages of these British Chinese websites welcome non-Chinese users, our examination of these sites suggests that the vast majority of users are of Chinese heritage. Websites such as Britishbornchinese and Dimsum cannot be said to be representative of all sectors of the British Chinese population, such as the elderly, undocumented Chinese migrants, or those without internet access. While the users of these web sites demonstrate genuine interest in any issues which concern Chinese people in Britain, these web sites are primarily aimed at, and run by, second generation British Chinese who regard their experiences and concerns to be distinct from those of their first generation parents and those of newly arrived Chinese migrants.

Since inception the British Born Chinese site has attracted over 7,000 registered members, and its main activity relates to the on-line discussion board (www.britishbornchinesedb.org.uk/forum/). This comprises 23 near real-time themed forums, moderated by a team of volunteers, which can be read by anyone, and on which members can post messages. By March 2006 over 740,000 messages had been posted. According to its administrators in March 2005, the site consumes over 25 Gigabytes of bandwidth and has over 7 million hits each month. At peak times during the day 40-90 members log in every hour.

The other main web site used by British-born Chinese is www.dimsum.co.uk, which was established in 2000. While Dimsum also has a discussion forum, this site's primary purpose has been to provide online commentary on key issues affecting Chinese people in Britain. The Dimsum site grew out of frustration felt by the original co-editors at the lack of a Chinese public voice and presence in Britain:

Initially when we talked about it, we were really excited and also frustrated that until now Chinese voices in the country had been really quiet…We were really sick of assimilation, of being quiet and invisible, and Chinese people fading into the background and not making a fuss…. We want to make a fuss (interview with Jack Tan, August 2000).

Because of their geographical dispersal, the British Chinese have had more to gain from the adoption of the Internet as a communicative tool. Participation on the British Born Chinese and Dim Sum sites has stimulated new forms of self-expression, collective identity formation, and social action which have hitherto been largely absent.

The apparently inconsequential banter often dominating the sites' discussion boards provides the supportive atmosphere enabling more serious topics to be broached. The site users share insights into how it feels to inhabit an ethnic category with little public profile, and strive towards a common understanding of shared dilemmas. As one user explains, "by becoming a member of the website you feel you belong to a community who shares your thoughts and feelings on being Chinese and living in Britain. You feel you are not the only one" (Angela, aged 24, reply by E-mail).

The existence of public forums like these web sites has offered the first media platform for "British Born Chinese" to become a collective identity with the potential to mobilize around, rather than merely a neutral self-description. This self-authored and self-regulated discursive arena offers scope for the "mobilization around meaning" (Castells 2001: 140) increasingly recognised as the driving force for social change (Alexander 2003). The creation of a shared emotional landscape may draw out the affective investment required for collective action (Melucci 1996).

In facilitating self-expression, the sites have made British Chinese social identity an object of public deliberation to an unprecedented degree. If identities are "the highly charged frameworks through which contemporary life is actively negotiated" (Downing and Husband 2005: 1) then discussion boards like these are significant sites for the exploration of life as a minority in a multicultural society is (Franklin 2003). Following Stuart Hall, we wish to stress the multiple and unfinished nature of identities fashioned in these settings, and their emergence "within the play of specific modalities of power" as "more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical naturally constituted unity…" (Hall 1996: 4).

These processes of active negotiation, boundary marking and political debate are particularly evident in the discussion forum threads on the British Born Chinese site. The general concerns of 16-30 year olds about belonging and inclusion, education and social mobility, parenting and family building are given a culturally specific inflection. The following themes recur: ethnic boundaries between Chinese and non-Chinese are regularly questioned and reasserted; changing Chinese identity in the West is both celebrated and problematised; potentially conflicting loyalties to Britain and China are expressed; experiences of racism are compared and empathised with.

Self-expression and the making of collective identities

Ethnic boundaries and ethnic authenticity

Many anxieties about the position of second generation British Chinese become evident in discussions about intergenerational change on the British Born Chinese site forums. Tropes of cultural loss, dilution and impurity circulate in regular exchanges about 'mixed race' relationships and the fate of 'mixed race' children. One woman's request for advice about starting a mixed family drew a variety of responses:

> I'm a BBC and my husband is English (caucasian). We've been married a few years and are now thinking about starting a family. I have to admit I'm a little worried about what problems we could potentially face with having a 'mixed race' child. I'm thinking about racism, losing the language, identity. I know I'm probably worrying too much. Has anyone else got similar experiences that they want to share?
> (posted by 'Leanne', 18th February 2005)

> Sorry to add to your worries but what about ur grandchildren? Chances are ur children will marry English partners rather then Chinese (especially if there are girls), So ur grandchildren will be less Chinese and the same will happen [sic] your great grand kids too. Eventually there will be no Chinese in ur family line. (posted by 'whatever' 20th February 2005)

One respondent takes this request for advice as a provocation to issue a highly gendered and sexualised definition of ancestral loyalty:

> all bbc girls who marry white husbands should all be ashamed of themselves. your parents didn't travel all the way to UK so that u can marry some smelly pink horrible monsters who pervs over chinese girls!
> (posted by 'borninuk', 23rd March 2005)

Leanne's plea for advice also drew more positive responses, albeit couched in terms of genetic robustness:

> I'm half Chinese, half English/white and I haven't had any problems with it. I don't understand what problems there could be at all and why people are so funny about it. Apparently the further apart your parents' genes, the more healthy/better it is for the child to have lots of variation in genes - the opposite of inbreeding. Just because they're part white, doesn't mean they can't learn about Chinese culture
> (posted by 'no future', 27th March 2005)

Discussions about mixed relationships connect with ongoing forum debates about cultural authenticity, racial purity and hybridity. The dominant disposition on the site is one of reflexive racialisation, an ongoing commentary on negotiating belonging and social location in a British society claiming to be multicultural and yet the site of ongoing racial

discrimination. Many users attempt to articulate a complex speaking position as both British and Chinese, which the site itself represents and may refashion over time:

> Being bbc is a 'culture' in itself - not just a half-way house of english and chinese, as neither can account for the unique experience of a bbc. I'm not sure if that counts as 'diluting' the chinese culture or not... If it does, then the only way to stop it is for no chinese to be born or raised in the West!!
> (posted by 'kimbo',18th June 2001)

Site users sketch out a rationale for rethinking of Chinese identity in a British context:

> To change is a GOOD thing, we shouldn't start reminiscing about a better past, but look FORWARD to creating our own culture, which will be a hybrid mix of east/west. We shouldn't think of ourselves as being westernised, but as incorparating western ideas into Chinese identity, making it our own, creating a dynamic relationship, instead of suggesting that we are passively subjected to western ideals!
> (posted by 'kero' 21st July 2001)

> We BBCs are a all new breed split with the feeling of maintaining loyalty to our cultural roots or embracing the western culture that we're already immersed in. One feels acknowledgement and support of traditional cultural values alongside western culture creates a more evolved and wordly BBC culture. This site is the first real positive step in creating a platform of sorts in which the individual attitudes and views can be combined to form a group of real strength......from where BBC'c can begin to define their new cultural evolution (posted by 'dr g8', 12th August 2001).

What is clear from these online discussions is a recognition of an emergent British Chinese sensibility and identity, however complicated and contested that identity may be. Related to discussions about ethnic boundaries and ethnic authenticity, much discussion has also focused on the issue of ethnic loyalties, and ties, if any, to China and Britain, respectively.

Ties to 'motherland' China?

One recurring debate in the discussion forums concerns what, if any, significance, China has for the British Chinese. This debate is far from unified, with a wide range of views expressed about China. In early 2004 an attempt by a North American web site - the Chinese Nationalist Alliance (www.theasf.net/forums) - to post messages on the British Born Chinese site and recruit members, was condemned. It elicited a clear self-identification from the majority of site users with being *British* Chinese, rather than just Chinese.

However, a year later a long-standing site member noted a growing drift towards sympathy for the mainland, perhaps due to China's emerging global profile. This possible shift was underscored in a message posted by a user with a China-born mother:

> Personally, I love China. It's the original. It's been "uncool", but now people are thinking otherwise because it's getting wealthier. But in my opinion, what makes China great is its heritage, the culture, the authenticity that makes a country itself. Not some wannabe-West, whose constant copying just doesn't match up to the real thing (posted by 'dinky chinky', 12th February 2005).

Reflecting this re-evaluation of China, a recurrent theme in the "Speaker's Corner" forum on the site is users posting reminders of Japan's conflict with China in the 1930s, and their connection to contemporary Sino-Japanese tensions. In March 2005 at a time of acute tension over the wording of a Japanese history textbook, an extensive discussion ensued. One user initiated the thread "Chinese and non-Chinese…Let's be less polite!" by forwarding a link to an on-line petition calling on the United Nations to reject Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the security council (posted by 'watchdog', 25th March 2005). 'Watchdog' later added:

> The Japs got off too easy, the point is that we should inform them that they haven't actually gotten off at all. We will raise the issue again and again until it is addressed with the respect and dignity we are entitled, as offended victims. Beijing should raise a new giant statue of a Chinese man in Tiananmen Square, with his middle finger defiantly pointing North East out toward the sea (posted by 'watchdog', 27th March 2005)

However, such sentiments do not win unanimous support:

> those hypocrites who moaned about white racism and then appear on this thread to attack Japanese pple should be ashamed of themselves. I, as a patriotic Chinese who values the tradition and culture of my ancestors, express my profound apologies for the repugnant and shameful behaviour of my community – as evidenced by the racist comments on this thread (posted by 'Porkscratchings' 27th March 2005)

The thread attracted 150 replies over the following two weeks, with protagonists invoking their families' past sufferings in conflict with Japan, comparing the case with Germany's treatment of the Holocaust, debating whether Japan deserved to be the victim of nuclear attack in 1945, whether China's policies towards Tibet are imperialist, and whether the Iraq war was justified.

The debate demonstrated the use of the forum to attempt to foster a loyalty among British born generations to their Chinese ancestry. However, the complex relationship of the British Chinese to China has prevented wholesale adoption of a "return to roots" China-based Chinese identity, what Hall terms a "collective 'one true self' " (Hall 1990: 223). The "Chinese" connection is often attenuated for British-born Chinese, with the majority

of their families originating from Hong Kong, as opposed to the People's Republic of China.

The distance between British-born Chinese and contemporary China is evident when messages calling on British Chinese to be more patriotic to the Chinese motherland are dismissed as provocations from "trolls", or firmly rebuked. For example when one user argued that

> BBCs must stop pretend to be British & work for their Motherland instead. It is duty and obligation of all Chinese (…) Every Chinese must always put China FIRST
> (Posted by 'Lin Ruihong', 3rd October 2005)

Respondents pointed out that China's visa entry system and refusal to grant overseas Chinese the possibility of dual citizenship did not encourage long-distance patriotism:

> us BBCs need to pay a ridiculous amount of money for a visa just to let us step foot into China, so in a way our 'motherland' has stripped us of our 'chinese citizenship', if motherland no longer wants us then we have no choice but to turn our back on her and work for another country instead.
> (Posted by 'wowzie', 4th October 2005)

Racism, integration, and belonging

Since the British Born Chinese site's inception in 1999, shared experiences of racism have prompted some of the most heartfelt and emotionally engaged responses in the British Born Chinese site's discussion forums. Because so many of the British-born Chinese grew up in families who ran Chinese take-away food businesses and restaurants, many of the website users are able to recall and to share their many experiences of racial name-calling and harassment, as they worked at the counter, serving customers (see Parker 1995). One discussion thread, "name and shame ur stupid customers", captured these everyday difficulties with a mixture of humour and resignation, and struck a chord with site users, attracting over 580 responses between April 2005 and March 2006.

The potential vulnerability of the Chinese catering worker was brought home in April 2005 when a takeaway owner, Huang Chen, was attacked and murdered by a gang of white youths in the town of Wigan, Northern England. Site users posted messages debating whether or not the incident should be interpreted as a racist murder:

> attacks on chinese takeaways are becoming more common. the community must surely start of thinking to support each other in the best way possible. right now, i can not help getting flashbacks/reflect on some of the bad 'racist' provocations we (as a family) had to endure on numerous of occasions, of once running a take away...fcuking barbarians!!!!!!!!! not doubt have racist parents too..
> (posted by 'bbc 1683', 29th April 2005)

I very much believe this attack involved racism of some sort. I really can't see a group of chav kids beating to death/verbally abusing a Chinese man without mentioning his race somewhat. Maybe I am being presumptuous? I'm just trying to use my common sense. I have a feeling the kids started getting rowdy, and Mr Huang Chen wasn't having any of it, perhaps unlike many other Chinese takeaway owners they've come across. So it was a case of, how dare this *Chinese* man get aggressive with us, we're really fired up now, lets batter him with the nearest thing we can find (…) Fact is, some people can't stand it when they see an ethnic person standing up for themselves or getting a bit aggressive when defending themselves. (posted by 'Dinky Chinky', 30th April 2005)

Consciousness of being an ethnic minority in Britain has also been heightened by recent events affecting other groups, raising questions about the position of British Chinese within a multicultural society. Unsurprisingly, the London bombings of July 7th 2005, and the loss of 52 lives, prompted considerable debate. Soon after the bombings, one thread which generated a great deal of discussion was '*Home grown bombers… How can this have happened?* Much of the discussion revolved around participants' understandings of what it meant to be integrated in Britain as a visible minority, as well as the question of whether British Asians were somehow subject to more or a different kind of racism as experienced by British Chinese people.

One poster, 'PekingDuck' responds to this thread:

Let me try to rationalise (not justify) how it happened. These people grew up in an ethnic ghetto in poor northern towns. They were subject to institutional racism since a very young age. With poor education and racism, they found it difficult to get a job. In 2001 the race riots took place in northern towns [conflicts between South Asian and White youths] triggered by BNP marches [British National Party – a right wing party, widely regarded to be racist]. Unlike their elders, they would not just shut up and take the sh1t, they reacted violently…. They turn inwards, towards their culture and religion – ripe fodder for suicide bomber recruits
(posted by 'PekingDuck', 12th July 2005).

But as another poster, 'merrica', points out,

'except that that is NOT the picture that is emerging of the alleged bombers. In fact the picture that is emerging (http://uk.news/yahoo.com/050713/140/fn8os.html) is of a fairly comfortable youth in quiet, stable families' (posted by 'Merrica', 12th July 2005).

'Merrica' quotes from this news report [in reference to one of the bombers, Shehzad Tanweer, 22]: 'He was intelligent. He went to university, Leeds Met, to study sports science. His plan was to go into sports.' 'He had everything to live for. His parents were loving and supportive. They had no financial worries'.

In reference to the so-called fourth bomber [a Muslim of Jamaican heritage], 'yin Lizi' said:

> What I found disturbing about the above (if it is a true reflection of Naveed Fiaz [other reports referred to him as Lindsay Jermaine] is that he was an apparently well integrated member of the community. Someone who worked with what are known in social work circles as 'the disaffected youth' – young people who feel a sense of dislocation with their place in the British community (posted by 'yin lizi', 14th July 2005).

One response to 'yin lizi' comes from 'dolly':

> Whatever the reason for the bomb attacks in London, there is NO excuse for what they did. I really do not see that they can prove ANYTHING by pulling off stunts like this. As for being martyrs and suicide bombers, I see even less reason for them to do something like this as they are not going to live to see the effects of their deeds. Chinese and Black people can deal with racism and war without having to kill hundreds of people, why can't they?
> (posted by 'dolly', 14th July 2005)

At this point, another poster, 'CharlieAddict', asserts: 'Chinese people don't deal with racism….And "they" could easily be you or me. "They" were brainwashed.' ('CharlieAddict', 14th July 2005).

'dolly' then responds:

> We are talking about young british born pakistani people raised in the same environment as us british born chinese people. Someone mentioned earlier that yes, they ARE dealing with racism and religious issues, but religious issues [are] less of a problem for chinese. How can you say Chinese people don't deal with racism? Look at all the stories we share on this board about dealing with racism. We do not resort to extreme attacks to try to prove our point. In fact, chinese people are the ones who get murdered by others or get unfairly prosecuted. This is the coward's way of dealing with unresolved issues
> (posted by 'dolly', 14th July 2005).

These exchanges reveal how users are grappling with the disjuncture between the simplistic ideal of 'integration' and the complex reality behind the seemingly unproblematic lives of well 'integrated' minority Britons – both Asian and Chinese. Furthermore, this exchange between 'dolly' and 'CharlieAddict' illustrates how there is active debate on these forums about how the status and experiences of British Chinese people may or may not be comparable with those of other minority Britons. Clearly, 'dolly' believes that there are significant commonalities of experiences among minority British people, while 'CharlieAddict' contests the view that Chinese people do experience racism in the way that Black and Asian Britons do. These exchanges are often

animated by a comparative victimhood, assessing relative degrees of social injustice faced by different groups. They raise important questions about the extent to which the British Chinese experience is similar to, or distinctive from, those of other second generation minority Britons, as well as the question of potential interethnic alliances and cooperation among these groups.

***The creation of internet forums aimed at a small ethnic group like British born Chinese people may appear divisive and insular. Yet such arenas offer unprecedented scope for the discursive elaboration of the changing terms of engagement between British Chinese people and wider society.* The prevailing spirit of these British Chinese sites is one of reflexive racialisation, recognising the ongoing reformulation of both British and Chinese cultures in the context of a multicultural society still structured by racialised inequalities and Orientalist stereotypes. Participation in on-line dialogue, which often entails an intense self-questioning and probing about presumed truths, demonstrates the ways in which users host a self-authored commentary on the many social and political issues they, and other ethnic minority people, encounter in British society.**

Social action and mobilisation through the Internet

The Internet has recently attracted attention for inciting radical, even violent, actions on the part of minority populations. A recent *Time* magazine cover story on 'generation Jihad' noted the fundamental significance of Internet web site usage (by second generation European Muslims) for the rise of radical Islamic movements and terrorism: 'In the past, the alienated would simmer in relative isolation, unable to connect or communicate with those who shared their anger. The Internet has changed that' (Powell, October 31, 2005).

Nothing of this order has thus far been stimulated by the British Chinese web sites we have analysed. However, the British Born Chinese and Dimsum sites have generated forms of social networking and political mobilisation which connect on-line and off-line interactions. For example, regular social gatherings of British Born Chinese site users occur in cities such as London (where an estimated 200 people gather each month), Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Bristol, and Brighton. The Dim Sum site has begun to hold regular gatherings with a Chinese cultural theme.

> I think one thing that still amazes me is to go to a meet, and encounter that person in conversation who will mention that they have not met another British born Chinese or Chinese from their upbringing, and the board is a way to find themselves. I'm sometimes still in awe of that (posted by 'totoro', 3rd April 2005)

The off-line connections developed through these social gatherings have deepened to include occasional direct action to counter events, policies or media coverage deemed inimical to British Chinese interests. On March 28th 2001 a mainstream tabloid, *The Daily Mirror*, printed inflammatory suggestions that Chinese restaurants and grocery stores could be the possible source of foot and mouth disease in Britain. Within days the

story had snowballed in the media, and Chinese businesses suffered a 40% drop in trade, and incidents of racial harassment in Chinese restaurants and take-aways were increasingly reported (http://www.minquan.co.uk/about-min-quan/).

In response to this adverse representation of Chinese food as a potential source of foot and mouth disease, the Dimsum web site, along with an alliance of Chinese activists and business people, helped to organize a demonstration (of several thousand people) that marched through central London to the Ministry of Agriculture. This unprecedented demonstration of British Chinese people secured a meeting (and apology) from a government minister, Nick Brown, who then exonerated the Chinese restaurant industry and praised the contributions of Chinese people to British society. One notable aspect of this demonstration was the diverse range of first generation Chinese businessmen and second generation Chinese, who demonstrated together. As a result of the foot and mouth crisis, and the subsequent demonstration in central London, the hit rates for the Dimsum site rose significantly, prompting the mainstream media to turn to this site for commentary on issues pertaining to the Chinese population in Britain:

> It had a really big impact on the site, and it had a really big impact on the Chinese community as well. After that a lot of people felt they could be politicised, and stand up and try and get the Chinese community included. I was perhaps a bit naïve at the time, thinking this was the start of the revolution and of course it never materialised. It has helped, but it's a long term process (interview with Sarah Yeh, editor of Dimsum.co.uk, June 2004).

In another intervention, the British Born Chinese site was involved in a campaign highlighting the absence of the opium trade from a 2002 British Library Exhibition about the East India Company. Following extensive debate about the exhibition on the discussion forum, the editor, Steve Lau, helped set up a rebuttal site: www.thetruthabouttradingplaces.org.uk. (accessible via The Internet Archive at www.archive.org). Furthermore, the British Born Chinese site organized a formal letter of complaint to be signed by 17 Chinese organizations – this number marking the 17 million Chinese people who had died during the period of trade and the Opium Wars. Members of the British Born Chinese site were contacted, and urged to complain to the British Library. In response to these actions, the British Library modified both the exhibition and their on-line material.

As the site is an informal arena rather than a formally constituted political organisation, it does not presume to speak on behalf of all British Chinese people. However, for the second generation British Chinese, it is clear that many issues which are topical and relevant to them are debated on this site, with no other comparable media forum available to air their opinions. For example, on the home page of the BBC site, there is a poll asking its users: 'Is there a need for an English language paper aimed at the Chinese community [in Britain] similar to The Voice [aimed at Black Britons] or Asian Times [aimed at Asian Britons]?

(I would change the example of

the poll, which has been static on the page since 2002, and the related thread which hasn't been added to since 2005 to the following:

For example, in March 2006 there were debates on the forum about Internet censorship in China, the adoption of Chinese babies by Western couples, and the increase in the teaching of Mandarin Chinese in English schools.)

While this article has focused on two specific web sites – www.britishbornchinese.org.uk and www.Dimsum.co.uk – other established British Chinese campaigning organisations have begun to utilise the Internet, and have been linked to the British Born Chinese forum, to enhance their work. For example the British Chinese civil rights action group, Min Quan, had an E-mail petition protesting against the redevelopment of Chinatown, London in February 2005 (www.minquan.co.uk) and launched an email petition protesting against racial attacks targetted at Chinese take-aways (www.minquan.co.uk/takeaway-racism), to counter the lack of attention such incidents have received in the media.

In June 2005 both the Dim Sum web site and users of the British Born Chinese discussion board highlighted a public forum on anti-Chinese racism held at the House of Lords. This was organised by Min Quan in response to the aforementioned case of Mr Huang Chen in Wigan, and the charging of his partner, Eileen Jia, with assault as she tried to defend herself. By October 2005 the case against Eileen Jia was dropped, partly in response to a Min Quan campaign, publicised on the Dim Sum and BBC web sites, and which attracted over 1,000 signatures to a petition sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Such examples demonstrate how sites like the British Born Chinese and Dimsum pages are not just ephemeral media texts, but are developing as social institutions in their own right. The continuous availability of on-line forums has helped overcome the geographical dispersal previously militating against the development of a British Chinese collective identity. *These interactions and political interventions are still episodic, with seemingly short-lived after effects, and not yet on the scale of the "cyberactivism" characteristic of some social movements (Kahn and Kellner 2005; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003; Van de Donk et al 2004). Yet we must not underestimate the significance of these modest mobilizations for British-born Chinese people's sense of collective identity, empowerment, and, perhaps most importantly, visibility.*

Conclusion

The growth of the British Born Chinese and Dimsum web sites has greatly enhanced the ability of British Chinese to not only connect with each other (online and offline), but it has also engendered lively debate about their experiences of being British Chinese, and in particular, issues of 'belonging' and inclusion within British society. The discussions on the forums reveal a recognition of both "British" and "Chinese" as internally differentiated categories, whose relationship is being debated and redefined by the lives explored through on-line dialogue. The terms of belonging and citizenship are actively

negotiated, vis-à-vis Britain, China, and Hong Kong. Examination of the discussion threads reveals that, while many British Chinese are faring well in higher education and the labour market, concerns about social marginalization and invisibility remain common.

Despite the emergence of a collective social category in the discussion forums and commentaries on these sites – that of being British Born Chinese (however complicated, partial, or multifaceted this identity may be) - essentialist, fixed understandings of racialised identity, and sentiments about ethnic authenticity and purity are also promulgated by some users on this site and elsewhere on the Internet. There is no automatic association between the use of new technology and the expression of fluid, multiple identities. Nor is there one unitary perspective or understanding about what it means to be British Born Chinese.

While many of the discussion threads do revolve around issues of identity and belonging, these discussions are not simply self-indulgent forays which lack a resonance with events in the real world. As discussed in this paper, the users' concerns about their identities and their relative marginality in British society meshed with their interest in the July 7th London bombings, and the alienation and concerns of other second generation minority Britons, encouraging them to make direct comparisons about the respective positions of different minority groups in Britain. The British Born Chinese and Dimsum sites have also been instrumental in encouraging public interventions on the part of a group which has been severely underrepresented in established political organizations.

Now that the sites are over five years old, their editors and users are considering how they might further the involvement of British Chinese people in wider social activities. One project which the British Born Chinese site editor, Steve Lau, is interested in developing is a mentoring bank. Through a database site users with specific skills, interests, or occupations, could mentor younger British Chinese and also assist existing British Chinese community organisations. Dimsum continues to highlight the difficulties of recent Chinese migrants, and the British Chinese organizations, such as Min Quan, who are working on the behalf of not only vulnerable recent migrants, but also Chinese victims of racist attacks. The British Born Chinese site has also indirectly generated other ways of linking British Chinese. For example, a former volunteer of the British Born Chinese site has been instrumental in setting up the British Chinese Society (**www.britishchinese.org.uk**), a membership organisation which holds regular social events, making charitable donations to British Chinese charities and voluntary groups.

The most significant long-term development may be an enduring attachment to these sites as one of the few available gathering points for British-born Chinese people. The relative longevity of the British Born Chinese site after five years has fostered a sense of responsibility for, and collective ownership of, the web site itself. This came to the fore when one of the site's volunteer moderators resigned, prompting tributes to the work invested in developing the site:

> It's just sinking in for me, how much the bbc community has benefitted from ppl among us stepping in and offering their help. Mod G's tributes read like a really

positive history of the Boards! Takes me right back to when the founders were just as surprised as the rest of us that unconnected British Chinese individuals could form such a sense of connection when brought together, online and outside.
(Posted by 'Kimbo' 25th October 2005)

Returning to our opening questions about belonging, inclusion and participation, the consequences of this newly-found "sense of connection" between British Chinese young people are still being worked through. On-line discussion forums like the British Born Chinese and Dimsum sites exhibit some aspects of Habermas's ideal of the public sphere as "a medium of *unrestricted* communication" (Habermas 1996: 308 original emphasis; see also Bohman 2004) where problems can be discussed more openly and sensitively than in more regulated settings.

However, the conception of political participation underlying public sphere theory, notably a normative model of deliberative democracy rooted in the rationalist pursuit of consensus requires some modification before being applied to groups like the British Chinese. As Siapera (2005 and 2006) points out, minorities without a deep-rooted infrastructure for articulating political demands are using new technologies like the Internet to make particular claims about their place in a multicultural society. Siapera locates this intersubjective formation of identities and aspirations as a prelude to entry into the public sphere. We prefer to view on-line communicative practices as contributing to a more pluralistic civic culture (Dahlgren 2005) on the same plane as the wider public domain. The sites we have explored foster an ethos of participation, engagement and wider reflection among some of their users which expands the range of issues brought to public attention, notably everyday experiences of racial discrimination faced by Chinese people in Britain.

These web sites have become part of a networked infrastructure for friendships, relationships, social activities, charitable donations and political interventions. They are helping to define an embryonic second generation civil society characterised by: a sense of not being at one with either mainstream social institutions or existing Chinese community leaders and organisations; an uncertainty over what kind of formal framework for representing British Chinese viewpoints, if any, should be established; a deep-seated frustration at the British Chinese population's lack of cultural and political visibility.

As yet no coherent political manifesto or movement is discernible in these discussion forums, but the creation of a British Chinese public discourse is a necessary prelude to sustained political consciousness and action, albeit outside the conventional figuration of the political. As Parham (2004) observes, 'We are still, however, in the beginning stages of understanding what combinations of geographic and Internet-based organization best facilitate community expression and networking in diasporic communities' (Parham 2004: 214).

A number of questions need further empirical investigation. First, what is the scope for ethnic-specific sites, such as British Chinese websites, to encourage interethnic

dialogue and alliances? If these sites appear to reinforce exclusive ethnic boundaries, will this contribute to an implacably one-dimensional assertion of 'difference'?

Second, to what extent do these websites truly represent the views and experiences of British born Chinese, across gender and class lines? These websites are likely to be typical of other minority websites in terms of how the representation of specific minority communities as singular and culturally enclosed, is in tension with the shifting and contested boundaries and membership of their varied users (Siapera 2006).

I'm not sure we can make the comparison with "other minority websites", partly because we don't specify what those sites are, partly because it seems a speculative point: the main point is that expressed in the second part of the sentence, which might be expressed and elaborated in this way

There is the potential for a hegemonic sense of British Chinese identity represented by well-educated computer-literate young people of Hong Kong Chinese origin to be in tension with the shifting and contested boundaries of contemporary Chinese identity. New divisions may be associated with class background, educational achievement, and gendered differences in attitudes to mixed relationships (twice as many Chinese women in Britain have non-Chinese partners compared to Chinese men according to the 2001 Census). There are also a variety of orientations to mainland China, and different degrees of investment in asserting a collective social identity as British Chinese.

Moreover, it may be that websites aimed at panethnic social categories, such as 'Asians' (comprised of disparate ethnic and religious subgroups), must attend more to how such subdivisions may be transcended.

(Need a specific example of such a site, the point seems unclear without one, or perhaps could be deleted if it's not elaborated)

Third, what are the relationships between online and offline interactions, and what proportion of British Chinese website users meet face to face? Does the geographical dispersal of British Chinese people mean that they are more likely to rely upon websites to interact with co-ethnics than are various sectors of the South Asian population – many of whom live in concentrated metropolitan areas? Future research should also explore processes of identity formation and social engagement among minority young people who do not use websites such as those we have studied.

Whilst the British Born Chinese and Dimsum web sites have developed novel forms of association for British Chinese people, the limitations of web-mediated interaction should not be overlooked. Internet activity has yet to overcome several decades of marginalisation of the British Chinese population. It is easier to start a discussion thread or sign an online petition than to stand for elected office, or constitute a formal body to represent British Chinese interests. Yet by drawing together several thousand people who

would otherwise have been unable to connect with each other, these web sites are enabling the emerging generation of British Chinese people to define their place in British society in their own terms for the first time.

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[i] This paper is based on an ESRC grant (RES-000-22-1642) 'British Chinese On-line Identities: Participation and Inclusion', which commences on September 2006.

[ii] There was, however, a British Chinese candidate for the Liberal Democrats in the 2005 General Election, Lyn Su Floodgate, who stood in the seat of Stockport and finished third.