

## **Ethnicity, Social Capital and the Internet: British Chinese Web Sites**

### **Abstract**

This article explores web sites developed to express the interests and experiences of young Chinese people in Britain. Drawing on content analysis of site discussions and dialogues with site users, we argue these new communicative practices are best understood through a reworking of the social capital problematic. Firstly by recognising the irreducibility of Internet-mediated connections to the calculative instrumentalism underlying many applications of social capital theory. Secondly, by providing a more differentiated account of social capital. The interactions we explore comprise a specifically “second generation” form of social capital, cutting across the binary of bonding and bridging social capital. Thirdly judgement on the social capital consequences of Internet interactions must await a longer-term assessment of whether British Chinese institutions emerge to engage with the wider polity.

**Keywords:** social capital, ethnicity, Internet, second generation, British Chinese.

## **Ethnicity, Social Capital and the Internet: British Chinese Web Sites**

### **Introduction**

In recent years, the concept of social capital has become ubiquitous among sociologists, political theorists and government policymakers (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Halpern 2005; Putnam, 2000; Schuller, Baron and Field, 2000). The key premise of social capital analysis is that social networks have value (Cohen and Prusak, 2001; Granovetter, 1973). Because of its productive potential, social capital is often understood as “the resources embedded in social networks accessed and used by actors” (Lin, 2001: 25). Besides this instrumentalist conception of social capital as a strategic resource for social action, the idea has taken hold for promising a solution to the wider problem of political disengagement in contemporary democracies.

The most well-known application of this civic virtue perspective on social capital is provided by Robert Putnam in his now famous book, *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000). Putnam laments the increasingly individualistic nature of contemporary society, and the decline of civic-mindedness, as

measured through peoples' participation in voluntary organizations, labour unions, and sports leagues. This decline in civic participation is worrying, because, according to Putnam, there is significant evidence that communities with a good 'stock' of these forms of social capital are more likely to benefit from better health, less crime, and economic growth, not to mention morale.

Despite its popularity, the social capital approach has been criticised for its indiscriminate application (Portes, 1998), for confusion over whether social capital is possessed by individuals, informal social networks, or the whole society (Bankston and Zhou, 2002), for embodying a moralistic concept of community (Amin, 2005), and for being "cross cut with troubling presences and absences around gender and generation" (Edwards, 2004: 4-5). In this article we argue for a more reflective application of social capital analysis to understanding the political participation of ethnic minorities.

Although some recent studies have examined the implications of the Internet for existing social relations and the stock of social capital (Castells, 2000; Norris, 2004; Smith, 1999; Tranvik, 2004; Wellman et al, 2003), there has been relatively little analysis of how ethnic minorities are utilising on-line social networks to foster collective action. Putnam's own work identifies the lack of a strong relationship between overall Internet usage and civic engagement (Putnam, 2000: 171) and highlights the potential for ever more

self-referential on-line contact between those with narrowly defined shared concerns (Halpern, 2005: 307). More recently the dangers of religious or ethnic exclusivity in online networking have been highlighted with Internet sites accused of inciting terrorism (Powell 2005) and spreading rumours which spurred interethnic disturbances in Birmingham in October 2005 (*The Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2005).

Our research takes a less sensational case, recognising the distinct barriers to participation faced by the descendants of post-war migrants to Britain from East Asia, and examining the scope for the Internet to act as a source of social capital for those without a history of active involvement in public affairs. We caution against recent studies which emphasise the individualising tendencies of the Internet, and the dissipation of collective identities into a “networked individualism” (Wellman, 2001). Such research may overlook the potential for minorities to harness new technology, deepen existing affiliations and generate new cultural formations. Our work explores the recent emergence of web sites developed by British Chinese young people, for the most part British-born descendants of post-war migrants to Britain from East Asia. The British Chinese have recently been held up as exemplars of high educational achievement, accounted for by forms of “capital” – economic, social and cultural - within the family and

community (Modood, 2004 for example). Yet, as many of the discussions on the web sites we explore illustrate, there is considerable frustration at the disparity between educational excellence and the lack of a British Chinese public profile. As research on Asian Americans has demonstrated (Zhou and Xiong, 2005), possession of educational capital does not automatically confer social inclusion and participation within the wider society. By examining possible links between social capital formation and on-line activity, we can trace the emergence of new forms of association and participation that may counter this social invisibility.

### **Ethnicity and Social Capital**

Just as feminists have begun to explore the gendered assumptions of social capital theory (Kovalainen, 2004), its presuppositions concerning ethnicity require careful elaboration. Putnam's discussion of social capital (Putnam, 2000) implies an ambiguous disposition towards ethnicity – a conjoined admiration and fear of the social capital ethnic groups create.

Putnam distinguishes between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital tends to reinforce group boundaries and identities, and is thus exclusive in nature. This type of capital is effective in

encouraging, if not enforcing, reciprocity and solidarity among in-group members. By comparison, bridging social capital is more inclusive, encompassing people across different social groups and backgrounds, thus encouraging the formation of broader identities and collectivities (Putnam, 2000: 22; Norris, 2004). For those like Putnam who see bridging social capital as the most productive for social cohesion, generalized trust is a necessary condition for a healthy democracy. This form of trust is disinterested, universalistic and transcends the clannish particularistic ties assumed to bind strong networks in ethnic groups (see Fukuyama, 1995).

On this view, ethnic groups can be *too* cohesive, if their social capital is excessively bonded, and they associate mostly with people of their ‘own kind’. They are likely to withdraw from civic participation, or engage exclusively in co-ethnic organizations and networks. For example Uslaner and Conley’s analysis (2003) of a *Los Angeles Times* survey of Chinese in California found that those who felt integrated in American society, and who had friends of diverse backgrounds, were likely to engage in civic participation. Those Chinese who felt marginalized and who primarily associated with exclusively Chinese people were more likely to join in ethnic civic associations only, or even opt out of civic life completely. Yet the very terms of these findings highlight the potential circularity of the

social capital approach: is social capital cause or effect of the civic dispositions associated with the term? (Roberts, 2004: 473). In addition, the idea of ethnicity as a social resource pre-dates the emergence of social capital analysis.

For years, sociological studies have examined the ways in which specific immigrant groups generate and benefit from ethnic ties which facilitate economic and social mobility (in the US see Light, 1972; Waldinger, Ward, and Aldrich, 1990; Wilson and Portes, 1980; Zhou, 1992; in the UK, Ward and Jenkins, 1984). From this perspective, the inward looking exclusive nature of ethnic ties can be beneficial both for these groups, and the wider society. Yet some of the recent literature on social capital and trust problematises solidaristic ethnic ties for coming at the expense of the broader, bridging connections seen as fundamental to wider forms of civic participation.

The overly crude depiction of ethnic social networks as an example of “particularised trust” implies that only interethnic social connections count as civic engagement. The dominant theorisation of trust within studies of social capital is unfairly dismissive of ethnic groups as potential contributors to the broader civic good precisely through the assertion of their ethnic identities. This weakness partly stems from a simplistic understanding of

ethnic groups as “by definition not internally diverse” (Uslaner and Conley, 2003: 355).

By contrast our analysis of Internet sites formed to reflect the experiences of British Born Chinese people demonstrates the complexity of intra-ethnic differences along the dimensions of gender, sexuality and generation. These very differences have stimulated debate and interaction as ethnicity is not a unitary category assumed without question by Internet users. In addition, far from preventing engagement with the wider society, these Internet forums have stimulated forms of political activity from a hitherto marginalised constituency.

Extended dialogues on the Internet offer material for analysing the varied compositional practices of categorisation, identification and institution-building that make up ethnicity (Brubaker, 2004). These practices do not neatly bound a clearly delineated group or express a pre-existing ethnic substance, but shape the formation of what counts as specifically ethnic. The analysis of these emergent communicative practices can no longer assume the automatic affinity between use of the Internet and fluid, multiple identities characteristic of early analysis of on-line life (Turkle, 1995). Like other second generation migrant groups, British Chinese young people were forming complex identities before the emergence of on-line communication.



Rather than generating hybrid identities from nowhere, the Internet has enhanced the possibilities for “expansive realization” (Miller and Slater, 2000: 10) offering new means for articulating what previously lacked the opportunity for public expression, in this case a latent British Chinese sensibility. Unregulated on-line discourse can lead to the reification of essentialist self-understandings, but may also allow for what Franklin terms a “nascent postcolonial politics of representation” (Franklin, 2003: 467) challenging hegemonic constructions of difference in mainstream media. For British Chinese people this politics of representation is an attempt to come to terms with living in a multicultural society, conscious of both ongoing experiences of discrimination, and the implications of China’s growing global prominence for how they are perceived. Self-narratives and social networks reflecting these concerns, and shaping the formation of distinctive multi-layered subjectivities, stem from the Internet sites we highlight below.

Until recently the concept of social capital has not been an explicit presence in sociological debates about ethnicity in Britain (see Goulbourne and Solomos, 2003; Modood, 2004). However, the New Labour government’s stress on social inclusion, active citizenship and community cohesion (Kearns, 2003) has given social capital a place in policy discourses concerning the future of ethnic minorities. Attention has focused on the

social networks within minority communities, and whether these help British-born generations to connect with valuable external resources (Strategy Unit, 2003). A Cabinet Office Report attributed barriers to social mobility faced by second generation ethnic minorities in Britain to their lack of social capital (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2002). The research to date, however, has not examined their use of the Internet to form new social connections. In this article, we examine whether the networks facilitated by British Chinese web sites are usefully understood as an emergent form of ethnic social capital.

### **Methodology**

Our study draws on several years of following the evolution of the web sites we discuss. Aside from three formal requests for help with our research posted on the site's message boards in 2001, 2003 and 2004, we have been non-participant observers rather than contributors. We have conducted face to face interviews with the site owners in the summer of 2004 and kept them informed about the nature of our research. We have posted short questionnaires and invitations to participants, asking them to explain what their use of British Chinese web sites means to them, and we quote from the 30 responses we have received, as well as from a selection of discussion

threads. As the sites are free to read without the need to register as a member, we regard their content as in the public domain. We recognise ongoing debates about the application of principles of informed consent and anonymity to the analysis of material on the Internet (Hine, 2005). However, we agree with Marianne Franklin that due respect for those posting messages, often with carefully chosen pseudonyms, intersects with “academic citation decorum” in quoting material exactly as it was submitted to the sites (Franklin, 2003: 488).

### **The Emergence of Chinese Websites in Britain**

The emerging body of literature concerning Internet use by diasporic transnational communities demonstrates the continuing significance of ethnic and racial identities for minority users of the Internet throughout the world (Adams and Ghose, 2003; Franklin, 2003; Georgiou, 2002; Hiller and Franz, 2004; Karim, 2003; Mitra, 2003; Parham, 2004). The Internet has become embedded in everyday communicative practices, expanding the repertoire of potential identity formations, and reshaping the ethnic habitus of users (Ester and Vinken, 2003; Panagakos, 2003). However, by focusing extensively on global diasporas, the work on “translocal cyberpublics”

brought together on-line (Ong, 2003) can overlook those forms of Internet activity still largely located within national boundaries.

Indeed, in the case of the Chinese in Britain, intra-national geographical dispersal has been the main constraint on collective action. While there are ‘Chinatowns’ in large metropolitan areas such as London and Manchester, these are primarily areas of commerce and do not constitute large and dense enclaves where many different kinds of Chinese people actually live, unlike in New York City’s Chinatown. Many first generation immigrants started out in waged work in Chinatowns around Britain, but once they became small business owners (of restaurants and take-aways), they dispersed throughout the country, resulting in the marked social isolation of Chinese people from one another (Parker, 1995; Song, 1999). Consequently, the British Chinese population has a high degree of geographical dispersal (Dorling and Thomas, 2004). As the editor of the British Born Chinese website put it, ‘None of us has a BBC neighbour’ [BBC used in this context and later in the piece stands for British born Chinese] (face to face interview with Steve Lau, September 2004).

The development of new media for the circulation of British Chinese public opinion is particularly timely, as what little media attention given to the Chinese in Britain has been negative and sensationalistic. The

suffocation of 58 people in a lorry at Dover Docks in 2000, and the drowning of 23 workers extracting cockles from Morecambe Bay in 2004 have highlighted the vulnerability of undocumented Chinese migrants. In 2001 and 2003 Chinese people and food were implicated in the foot and mouth and SARS health scares. Since the turn of the century Britain's "silent minority" has made the headlines with unaccustomed frequency. Yet these isolated episodes of hyper-visibility have emphasised the lack of public awareness of a second generation British born Chinese population.

Partly to counter such representations, a number of web sites have begun to articulate distinctively British Chinese viewpoints. Participation on the web sites we explore engenders two potential sources of specifically 'second generation' social capital. Firstly, the creation of a new dialogic space in which deliberation, reflection and expressions of emotional support give public recognition to an emerging British Chinese identity. Secondly, the social networks, face to face meetings and occasional political mobilization stimulated by the sites. Although the potential social capital arising from Internet communication may appear less tangible than the ethnic ties which foster ethnic business success, it could be particularly important for securing Chinese people's well being and inclusion in British society, as the British-

educated try to establish a socio-economic profile outside the catering industry (Song, 2003).

The self-declared purposes of the two sites we analyse resonate with some core components of social capital - information-sharing, networking and participation in political debate. The British Born Chinese site was established in 1999 and aims to “provide a forum in which British Born Chinese can share experiences, ideas and thoughts” ([www.britishbornchinese.org.uk](http://www.britishbornchinese.org.uk)). One of its founders, Steve Lau, had set up a web site called Chinatown Online as a portal for those interested in Chinese culture and Chinese food in Britain. The site attracted a considerable number of British born Chinese users, many of whom used its discussion board to urge the creation of a site specifically geared to their experiences. As a result, [www.britishbornchinese.org.uk](http://www.britishbornchinese.org.uk) was formed.

The site has grown into the main participatory Internet site for British Chinese people with 7,000 registered members, set against a total Chinese population in Britain of 247,000, of whom 38% are aged 16-34 (ONS 2005). The site’s discussion forum has become the main focus of interest and had hosted over 700,000 messages by the end of 2005.

The other main site expressing British Chinese sensibilities is called Dim Sum ([www.dimsum.co.uk](http://www.dimsum.co.uk)) established in 2000 by Sarah Yeh, a British born

Chinese designer, and Jack Tan. Although it also has a discussion forum, Dim Sum's primary role has been to provide online commentary on many of the key issues affecting Chinese and East Asian people in Britain. Dim Sum has always had a more explicit cultural-political agenda than the British Born Chinese site: "Dim Sum hopes to be able to give voice to the views of ethnic minorities that have, until now, been silent or ignored." (www.dimsum.co.uk). The Dim Sum site grew out of frustration felt by the original co-editors at the lack of a Chinese public voice in Britain:

Initially when we talked about it, we were really excited and also frustrated that until now Chinese voices in this country had been really quiet... We were 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 (face to face interview with Jack Tan, August 2000)

For both these web sites, the previously latent collective identity of "British Chinese" becomes a focus of contested elaboration in the site's discussion forums.

## **Reflexive racialisation**

This board itself tells a story in every thread, about the lives of some of our community. If ever a magazine or review were to talk of British Chinese representation, this website would be a prime example (posted by ‘watchdog’, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2002, British Born Chinese web site)

With 23 thematic forums on the British Born Chinese site’s near real-time discussion board, registered members are able to exchange ideas about what it means to grow up as a person of Chinese origin in Britain. There is regular discussion of the characteristically British Chinese childhood of working in the family takeaway business (Song, 1999). For instance a member posted on “The Job Club” forum asking for hints on “wording your takeaway job on your CV”. A humorous reply re-interpreted the lessons learnt from nights spent behind the counter:

Health and Safety Compliance Supervision (Mopping up at closing time) Stock Management and Turnover Logging (Aiyah! no more beansprouts!) Food Preparation Supervision (Where are the lids?!?)  
Where are the lids?!?)



(Posted by ‘noodleboy’, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2004, British Born Chinese website)

Experiences of dealing with racism in everyday life are a recurrent forum theme. In October 2004 a site member asked for advice on how to respond to “being called Chinky” by a number of young men whilst on a university campus (posted by ‘MBF’, British Born Chinese web site 18<sup>th</sup> October 2004). One user replied “report them to anti-fascist student groups” (posted by ‘agent 808’, British Born Chinese web site, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2004). Another suggested “If there was a next time I would advise you to take a note of their registration number and then approach them to ask what their problem was (...) to talk to them and possibly shame them into realising that someone would actually respond to their childish taunts” (posted by Winifred, British Born Chinese web site, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2004).

Such interchanges are examples of *reflexive racialisation*. We use this term to highlight the Internet’s ability to act as an instantly accessible, interactive and archivable medium hosting a self-authored commentary on a wide array of issues encountered by racialised minorities in a multicultural context. These exchanges constitute not only a wide variety of intellectual debates about the position of Chinese people in Britain, but also an

important source of emotional support for people who have shared many experiences in common.

Reflexive racialisation stems from the interactive nature of the discussion boards encouraging extended observations on the affective dimensions of ethnicity. The material posted refers not just to lived experience, but the *felt* experience of growing up as Chinese in Britain. Everyday difficulties and dilemmas are discussed with a mixture of anger, humour, cynicism and sarcasm. The vicissitudes of British Chinese life are seen to full effect in the “Name and shame ur stupid customers” thread which began in April 2005, and by December 2005 had attracted over 370 responses. This began as a humorous litany of the daily reckoning with inebriated, incoherent and impolite customers faced by many British Chinese young people in their working lives in the catering trade. It also provided a perspective on the racialised everyday encounters across the counter often mediated by young people taking orders. One site user, mei mei, has posted many examples of the treatment meted out by abusive customers, for example referring to an incident when she refused to serve a serial offender:

they called me racist for not serving them...they refused to leave calling me a chinky, illegal immigrant a disgrace to the country I need my skin bleaching and I'm making too much money out of english people!!!!

Posted by 'mei mei lai', 7<sup>th</sup> April 2005

One fellow site user responded to further messages:

I only had to work in a chippy when I was about 15 (hated it, particularly hate stupid ignorant white chavs who think they can treat Chinese people like crap) so haven't had to experience the crap that a lot of you have (Meimeilai, I'm surprised you haven't tried to emigrate yet!!! You have to put up with so much of what is wrong with

England!) Posted by 'Karaoke queen', 26<sup>th</sup> August 2005

Website discussion forums are one of several novel communications tools eagerly taken up by British Chinese young people to express an otherwise latent collective identity. There are significant connections between these Internet discussion forums and other digital media. The web sites have evolved to include more interactive features such as Instant Messaging, and many of the individual users of the British Born Chinese site have links to their own web sites or weblogs at the foot of their messages.

Through self-expression via these media the embodied social identity of "British Chinese" is given a personal definition, whilst connecting to a collective experience, anxious to contest the stereotypical depictions of Chinese people afflicting the everyday experiences of those using the sites.

Countering Orientalist representations in mainstream media attracted the involvement of Lai Yan, who became a volunteer for the Dim Sum web site:

I was quite amazed there were groups who were willing to stand up against the press. I think that's the main thing, there are some stereotypes out there, and you think...you just get so angry when you read about them, and you think "I wish somebody was there to try and speak up for us", and I think Dim Sum was one of the few groups that actually did (interview with Lai Yan, Dim Sum web site volunteer)

A user who was asked about the significance of the British born Chinese site replied: "The site contributes to shared experience by encouraging exchanges that otherwise would not find a place to happen. It indicates not only the concerns, but also the presence of Chinese people in Britain"

(Andy, site user, E-mail response)

This sense of presence has been extended to off-line social gatherings organised through the British Born Chinese web site. The main "official gathering" is in London once a month when over 100 British Born Chinese gather for a social meeting. The web site is used to advertise these and similar meetings in many other cities throughout Britain. These get-togethers and everyday Internet exchanges have reshaped the lives of many site users.

I never used to mingle with people of Chinese origin, and quite often felt there was a gap in my identity. But since joining the site, posting, and attending meetings, I have begun to resonate with experiences of others and have shared mine with an understanding I have never experienced before ('Wai Yee', site user, response by E-mail)

This respondent estimates she has made over a hundred acquaintances and three dozen close friends through her membership of the site. Such networking and socialising opportunities are not confined to Britain itself.

British Born Chinese people regularly travel to East Asia, particularly Hong Kong, where many have family, with some re-locating there permanently. The British Born Chinese web site is a crucial source of information about Hong Kong. A "British Born Chinese in Hong Kong" group advertises its gatherings on the web site. There is a monthly meeting attended by 50 people in Lan Kwai Fong, central Hong Kong. The organiser of these meetings describes the social networks developed as a result:

Through the meetings, all types of groupings of friends have emerged.

On a more formal basis, we've formed a British Born Chinese Hiking

group. There was even a Tai Po group [Tai Po is a name of a town in Hong Kong] that existed for a while. We're even going to have our first wedding between two people who met because of the Internet and our Hong Kong gatherings (Chris, organizer, British Born Chinese in Hong Kong group, by E-mail).

Knowledge of Hong Kong is a prized asset, recurrently sought on the web site:

Another thing we do is use the Internet for information gathering/sharing e.g. fielding questions on accommodation in Hong Kong, tailors that make custom suits, general information on Hong Kong, job vacancies, etc. It's a collective resource potentially tapping into all our members. Not all of it is hard fact. There's a fair deal of emotional support, or a support network for people having problems, who don't know what to do, and are not sure of their (cultural) identity (Chris).

These web-based dialogues lend themselves to analysis in terms of social capital theory. The reflective context for the testing out of identities stimulates the sharing of sometimes highly emotive experiences both via the

Internet and face to face in the regular meetings organized through the web sites. The sharing of these experiences can be cathartic and the reciprocal emotional empathy offers a form of on-line social capital in nurturing sufficient trust to stimulate friendships, relationships and an enhanced collective identity.

These sites transcend individualistic conceptions of social capital as “investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace” (Lin, 2001: 19). The web sites would not have been established or sustained over five years without considerable time and financial commitment on the part of their unpaid editors and moderators. The editors of the British Born Chinese site were funding the monthly server hosting costs for several years before seeking voluntary contributions from site members in early 2005, and have retained the site’s advertising-free, not for profit status.

### **Public ethnicity and social mobilization**

The wider significance of Internet sites like these lies in offering a potential counterweight to the long-standing marginalisation of Britain’s ethnic minorities from formal representative and policy-making institutions (Lieberman, 2005). Users express an overriding concern with the

contribution of these sites to the public recognition of British Chinese social claims:

Sites like this will contribute towards British Born Chinese asserting their presence in British society. Where has our voice been up till now?

Sites like this are voices at the grassroots level (Pauline, by E-mail)

Yet even those definitions of social capital recognising it as a public good (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) fail to appreciate how ethnic identities expressed through struggles against subordination are a defining feature of a multicultural democracy. Theorists of social capital concerned with political participation have espoused a limited conception of what constitutes civic engagement (Putnam, 2000; Uslaner and Conley, 2003). Their neo-Tocquevillean conception of a consensually associative society fails to do justice to oppositional forms of social action, and at times, implies ethnic forms of association are inimical to civic life. Yet it is precisely through mobilisations organised by ethnic web sites that many of the British born Chinese population have engaged in political action for the first time: “The messages posted on the site are experiences that British Born Chinese may identify with, making them feel closer as a community through the sharing



of experiences, it can also be a foundation where discussions taking place can lead to actions taken on behalf of the community” (Ly Lan, site user, E-mail response).

On several occasions since their inception, the British Born Chinese and Dim Sum web sites have tried to redress the political marginalisation of Britain’s Chinese population by mobilising collective action. As the editor of the British born Chinese site observed: ‘Because the profile of the Chinese is so well-known as an invisible community’, young Chinese people’s assertion of their presence and views on various social and political issues within the public sphere has been both novel and empowering.

For instance, in 2001 the British born Chinese site was instrumental in challenging what some of its members regarded as an offensive and racist characterization of the film ‘Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon’ in *The Guardian* newspaper. An article by Charlotte Raven stated, “I have no doubt that if Crouching Tiger had been in English, the script would have seemed unforgivably banal. In Chinese, delivered inscrutably, it seemed to contain multitudes” (*The Guardian*, 16<sup>th</sup> January 2001). The British Born Chinese site editor explained how protests from users of Dim Sum and the British Born Chinese sites helped secure an apology for the use of the word ‘inscrutable’ (*The Guardian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2001)

There was the protest toward the Guardian newspaper about “Crouching Tiger” – I don’t know if you knew about that. It complained about “wooden dialogue”. That was our starting point because we got a victory in there. We got an apology. The use of the word “inscrutable”. Where did that come from? It wasn’t accidental, and it was in *The Guardian*! If it was in the *Daily Mail*, we wouldn’t have taken any notice. And everyone was feeling, hey, it worked! If you say something, people listen (Interview with Steve Lau, editor of British born Chinese site, 29<sup>th</sup> September 2004).

Another campaign in which these Chinese websites mobilised collective action concerned an allegation, first carried in the Times and Guardian newspapers of 27<sup>th</sup> March 2001 – that recycled waste food from Chinese restaurants in Newcastle fed to pigs in the North East of England was the source of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in spring 2001. The *Daily Mirror* newspaper of 28<sup>th</sup> March 2001 also alleged that illegal meat was being imported and sold in some takeaways and restaurants, leading to a major downturn in trade in these establishments.

In response, the Dim Sum web site, together with an alliance of Chinese activists and business people, helped organise a demonstration of several thousand that marched through central London to the Ministry of Agriculture on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2001. The agriculture minister, Nick Brown, read out a statement exonerating the Chinese restaurant industry and lauding the contribution of Chinese people to British society. As a result of the demonstration, the hit rates for the Dim Sum site rose dramatically, and since then the mainstream media has turned to the site for commentary on issues affecting the British Chinese population:

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 Dim Sum, June 2004).

Another campaign against the representation of Chinese themes, involved the British Born Chinese web site joining in criticism of "Trading Places",

the British Library's 2002 exhibition on the East India Company's 400 years of trade. According to Steve Lau:

It [the exhibition] completely glossed over the Opium Wars. We got a press release before it opened. And I inquired, "Where do you mention the opium trade?" And they effectively refused to talk with us. What they did was send us a copy of the book that accompanied the exhibit, and this book blamed the opium trade on Chinese collaborators, and we were outraged by this, and said this was not fair.'

Following intense debate about this exhibition on the discussion forums of the British born Chinese site, the editor, in collaboration with others, set up a rebuttal site, 'thetruthabouttradingplaces.co.uk' to counter the content of the British Library's official site on the exhibit.

In addition to creating the counter-site, 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 who had died during the period of trade and the Opium Wars. An e-mail campaign followed, in which members of the site were contacted, and urged to complain to the British Library. Established Chinese community leaders,

such as Thomas Chan, a member of the Home Office Race Equality Advisory Panel, and Lord Michael Chan, also got involved in the critical response. Faced with this concerted challenge, the British Library relented and added a section about the Opium Wars to their exhibit.

In April 2005 messages on the British Born Chinese site drew attention to the case of Mr Huang Chen, who was killed during an attack by a large group of local youths in his takeaway food shop in Wigan (“Chinese Takeaway Attack”, British Born Chinese site) 29<sup>th</sup> April 2005. His partner, Eileen Jia, was later charged with affray as a result of her actions in trying to defend herself. A message linking to the Chinese campaigning group Min Quan’s on-line petition calling on the Director of Public Prosecutions to drop all charges helped secure over 1,000 signatures ([www.minquan.co.uk/takeaway-racism](http://www.minquan.co.uk/takeaway-racism)). In October 2005 the charges against Eileen Jia were dropped. Partly in response to this incident, the British Born Chinese site was also used to help develop an on-line bi-lingual booklet “Dealing with Harassment in Takeaways and Restaurants”, with users editing on-line drafts. Such uses of the Internet can be extremely valuable for marginalized minority groups, such as the British Chinese, by disseminating information about perceived injustices and facilitating counter-interventions in the public domain (Parker, 2003; Georgiou, 2002).

However, whilst the Internet has fostered a new sophistication in British Born Chinese political involvement, its form as a rapid-response medium may not in itself facilitate long-term institution-building. For instance, the editors of the Dim Sum and the British Born Chinese sites sat together on the Chinese Civil Rights Action Group (CCRAG), an umbrella group set up in the midst of the 2001 foot and mouth crisis to combat misrepresentations of the Chinese community. The CCRAG split after one year, precipitated by disagreement over how to commemorate the deaths of the 58 Chinese people discovered at Dover docks. While Dim Sum and some other members of the committee proposed that a memorial be built in honour of those who died, Steve Lau, representing the British Born Chinese site, opposed the suggestion:

Like it or not, a huge proportion of the community didn't want to have anything to do with the Dover 58, in terms of traditional Chinese concerns about bringing shame upon the community. They'd [the Dover 58] committed an illegal act, they'd been caught. Almost, they're not Chinese.

By contrast the Dim Sum site offered forceful and incisive commentary about the plight of the 'Dover 58'. More recently, this site also posted supportive editorials about the tragic death of Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay in January 2004. For example one article described the events as "devastating not only for the victims and their families, but also for the Chinese community as a whole" ("A tragedy compounded", Dim Sum web site, February 2004).

The Dim Sum web site's commentaries continue to highlight the experiences of recent Chinese migrants, and the British Chinese organisations working on their behalf, most notably Min Quan, the London-based Chinese campaigning group mentioned above. Dim Sum hosts the Min Quan web site ([www.minquan.co.uk](http://www.minquan.co.uk)). Dim Sum also publicised the unveiling of a memorial stone at Dover in June 2005 for the 58 Chinese migrants who died at Dover. However, partly because of the political tensions generated through these debates, the Dim Sum web site has shifted emphasis somewhat away from civil rights activism towards the promotion of British Chinese arts and culture.

We'd like to work to promote Chinese arts and culture and really give the Chinese community a positive image. Hopefully provide some

strong role models and help the Chinese community to find their voice, and find their place in the British culture (interview with Sarah Yeh, Dim Sum site editor, June 2004)

### **Towards British Chinese civil society?**

British Chinese web sites like British Born Chinese and Dim Sum have already generated considerable online debate and several significant, but short-lived, political campaigns. However, their long-term consequences depend on whether they can develop as enduring social institutions in their own right, or encourage the growth of new forms of social mobilization. Developments of this kind would merit analysis in terms of social capital, for as Bourdieu's definition implies, it is the resources "linked to possession of a *durable* network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" that distinguish social capital as a collective good from privately appropriable financial capital (Bourdieu, 1986: 248, our emphasis).

Currently without paid staff, and run by volunteer administrators, moderators, and programmers these web sites are subject to severe capacity constraints, "It needs a paradigm shift. And that's linked with funding and



status” (Steve Lau, editor British Born Chinese site). Steve Lau would like the site to match the professional skills of many British Born Chinese with the needs of the community groups trying to meet the needs of the wider Chinese population:

What we do is promote social cohesion. Sometimes BBCs get frustrated because there are no opportunities to be involved in the Chinese community. I’d really like to set up a volunteering bank. Hooking up BBCs with local Chinese associations, like for IT skills. The profile of the BBCs offers such a wealth of skills. I’m sure there would be people who would be willing to give up 2-3 hours a month. It’s not that much. But that would take someone actually doing that job. But at this point we don’t have any staff. We’re all busy people. We have been looking at charitable status, under the umbrella of Chinatownonline. The BBC site on its own is unlikely to get charitable status (Interview with Steve Lau, September 2004).

A fledgling example of how British Chinese on-line activity may have enduring off-line consequences is the British Chinese Society ([www.britishchinese.org.uk](http://www.britishchinese.org.uk)). Started by a member of the British Born

Chinese site, the British Chinese Society site is less immediately interactive than the other sites featured in this piece. The web site promotes and reports on social events run by the British Chinese Society, a membership organisation with a formal constitution and an explicit philanthropic dimension:

The Society is for British born Chinese or British Chinese. We organise events, we offer a social forum, we try to promote Chinese culture where possible and we try to help the Chinese community through charitable causes (interview with Paul Ho, British Chinese Society, May 2004)

The Society's events have raised money for British Chinese voluntary organisations such as the Chinese Mental Health Association.

A further tangible illustration of a developing British Chinese civil society facilitated by new media is *Chinatown, the Magazine*. This bi-monthly English language print magazine distributes 10,000 copies each edition throughout Britain. *Chinatown* has utilised the Internet to raise its profile. In September 2004 the magazine organised the first ever awards to “celebrate Chinese achievements in multicultural Britain”, held at the Café Royal in

London (see [www.chinatownthemagazine.com](http://www.chinatownthemagazine.com) and [www.thepearlawards.org.uk](http://www.thepearlawards.org.uk)). The organisers secured a letter of support from Tony Blair:

These groundbreaking awards highlight inspiring role models for the whole country to follow and show the valuable role of the Chinese community in enriching and sustaining contemporary British life (letter from Tony Blair dated February 2004)

The backing of these now annual awards by a newly created “social enterprise organisation”, the Pearl Foundation, shows the engagement of British Chinese with different models of collective action and institution-building. The older generation of Chinese businessmen engaged primarily in catering businesses have thus far constituted the main public face of Chinese people in Britain. By contrast the British born Chinese are beginning to express a distinctive and complex British-based sensibility, casting the institutions they create in the mould of British civil society.

Another crucial factor shaping the potential of British Chinese web sites is their ability to broaden the scope of Chinese identity and experiences, and foster intra-ethnic bridging ties. An example is the launch of a site

specifically for British Chinese lesbians. At first glance this appears to confirm concerns that the Internet fragments populations into ever more segmented enclaves. Yet the response to [www.bbclesbian.co.uk](http://www.bbclesbian.co.uk)'s launch announcement on the Dim Sum discussion forum demonstrated the opening out of British Chinese identity to new formations. A member of a United States web-site, the Chinese Nationalist Alliance, simply posted the one-word message "Disgusting" in response (posted by Kapai, Dim Sum discussion forum, February 27<sup>th</sup> 2004). This brought a vigorous defence from a number of Dim Sum site users, for example:

Kapai, that is exactly why you aren't going to see much support for your nasty little racist homophobic website ( ...) What you have said here, just that one word, tells everyone all they need to know. You are an intolerant bigot (posted by GweiLo, March 1<sup>st</sup> 2004, Dim Sum discussion forum)

The originator of the lesbian web site replied:

Just wanted to say cheers for your response to Kapai's deeply bigoted remark. It's good to know that there are people like you out there who

are not willing to tolerate a post like that in a progressive, positive and empowering environment such as Dim Sum (Lalamyc, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2004, Dim Sum discussion forum)

For the editor of [bbclesbian.co.uk](http://bbclesbian.co.uk), “it did feel like a significant moment for people in the Chinese community to not back him and support my site”, (E-mail discussion with the editor of [www.bbclesbian.co.uk](http://www.bbclesbian.co.uk)). Both the range and depth of British Chinese identity formations is expanded through new interventions of this kind. The British Chinese lesbian site now has a discussion forum of its own, with 75 members, and as the site editor notes “through the web site women have finally been able to support each other and being a dialogue. There have been so many comments of ‘I thought I was the only one’, so generating that empowerment has been fantastic” (E-mail discussion with the editor of [www.bbclesbian.co.uk](http://www.bbclesbian.co.uk)).

These exchanges demonstrate the emergence of bridging ties *within* the British Chinese population, illustrating the diversity and ongoing contestation among members of a putatively homogeneous ethnic group. The interventions by the British born Chinese and Dim Sum sites on various social and political issues have highlighted pressing questions about who

should represent ‘the’ Chinese community, requiring a reconsideration of Chinese peoples’ representation and involvement in the public sphere.

Our study has some affinities with recent research highlighting new forms of political representation among Black and South Asian British communities (Shukra et. al, 2004). Frustration with existing channels of participation has been countered by the emergence of a “transitional public sphere” (ibid: 33). This arena of national bodies such as the National Assembly Against Racism attempts to connect the mainstream public sphere of political parties and public sector institutions with an “alternative public sphere” of grass-roots minority activism. Our work adds two elements to Shukra et al’s analysis. Firstly, we have highlighted the British Chinese population, which is routinely overlooked in discussions of ethnic minority politics. Secondly, we have explored the potential of the Internet to engage previously unrepresented constituencies. The Internet has enabled second generation British Chinese to forge their own social networks, independent of the mainstream. Whether these connections comprise social capital depends on how durable these emerging channels of expression prove, and whether the concept of social capital itself is given a more differentiated treatment.

## **Second generation social capital**

The notion of social capital captures something of the significance of these new forms of Internet association in connecting ethnic minorities to new sources of support, aligned with their emerging social identities. However, unless cautiously adopted and significantly refined, the concept of social capital may overlook the heterogeneity within the same generation of ethnic group.

Using the concept of social capital to understand these new social networks requires a recognition of a specifically ‘second generation’ social capital. This may emerge from a group consciousness and network which generates dialogue, debate, and emotional support, as well as online and offline networks which facilitate social and political mobilisation. In addition to forging personal and political links with other British born Chinese, many of the second generation want to play a more active part in the wider British society. This is manifest in one aim of the British born Chinese website – ‘to encourage social cohesion and good race relations’ (interview with Steve Lau, 29<sup>th</sup> September 2004). The ties and informational resources specific to this emerging generation reflect a negotiation of competing pressures towards assimilation and segregation.

In the terms offered by Putnam (2000), second generation social capital is more than just a mixture of bonding and bridging elements. This bonding/bridging binary fails to capture how the optimal combinations of bonding and bridging social capital change over time (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000: 418) and are relative to the social location of the group in question. Thus, for the initial descendants of migrants, lacking a long tradition of political activity, the nurturing of bonding capital and particularised trust may be a necessary precursor for bridging activities, given the starting point of political marginalisation. The importance of social spaces, both physical and discursive, within which the confidence of minority groups can be built and rhetorical capacities developed prior to involvement in the wider world has been stressed in both classical and contemporary accounts of ethnically diverse societies (Park and Miller 1921; Halpern, 2005: 262). Second generation minorities occupy a distinct social location, having access to educational opportunities and facility in the English language to a far greater extent than their parents. However, because many lack an intergenerational chain of inherited connections to powerful institutions, this places a premium on self-generated social networks as a means of accessing economic and political influence beyond full-time education. Given this disadvantage, what some thinkers dismiss as



fragmented “enclave deliberation” (Sunstein, 2001: 75) in web sites like the ones we have explored may be a necessary proving ground for the cultivation of civic literacy and the participatory disposition rooted in everyday experiences required for involvement in public affairs (Dahlgren, 2005; Siapera, 2005).

Yet in time “for bonding social capital to deliver requires bridging social capital” (Pieterse, 2003: 46). Beyond this, to enact meaningful social change, these sites need to generate linking social capital (Woolcock, 1998). In contrast to the stress of bonding and bridging forms on lateral social connections, linking capital emphasizes the importance of accessing the powerful, connecting with those higher in the social hierarchy through “insertion into larger and more complex social networks” (Woolcock, 1998: 175). For more robust civic participation, social institutions capable of speaking truth to the centres of power must also grow over time.

The specificity of “second generation social capital” lies in being a mixture of bonding, bridging and linking forms. The British Chinese web sites discussed here share strategies for responding to racism and offer advice on being a “British Chinese exile” in East Asia, as well as recognising the internal diversity within the ethnic population, such as the British Chinese Lesbian site mentioned above. Such examples point to the

'bridging' ties emerging within, as well as outside, of the British Chinese community. Bridging social capital need not be exclusively 'interethnic' in nature.

Tentative steps have also been taken to connect these sites to sources of influence and power in the wider society, and thus generate linking social capital. For example, the British born Chinese site plans to organize a mentoring scheme and a volunteer bank. The Dim Sum site has highlighted the plight of recent Chinese migrants, and offers British Chinese artists a forum for the discussion and promotion of their work. Both sites played a role in mobilizing participants from around the country to the April 2001 march of British Chinese people through central London. Both sites have begun to be used by organizations seeking to reach a British Chinese constituency, for example the Northern Ireland Police Service advertising vacancies on the British Born Chinese site.

These forms of social capital in time will enhance the ability of British-born Chinese to assert their public ethnicity and secure their participation and inclusion in the wider society. The nature and function of this social capital is subject to change and contestation, as distinct subgroups of the Chinese community assert their own views and agendas about what progress for Chinese people in Britain requires. The public face of the British Chinese

has thus far been dominated by older businessmen in the Chinese restaurant and take-away food trade. The emerging second generation in Britain, which is characterized by high levels of education, concentration in professional sectors, but geographically dispersed residence, is using these on-line forums to develop new social networks and on occasions intervene in public debates.

## **Conclusion**

Some people may think that this is just a silly little community discussion board, but I think it is more than that. I think it is a place to learn, increase understanding of other people, widen social network, make friends, arrange meets with people of like mind  
(posted by 'Richard Chan', British Born Chinese site, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2005)

As this user's comment suggests, the Internet sites established by British Chinese people in the last few years have a significance beyond the words posted in their on-line discussion forums. New communicative practices, novel social gatherings, and unprecedented forms of public action have

resulted from the ability to bridge the geographical dispersal of the Chinese population in Britain. Their wider importance lies in offering a forum for deliberation connecting a group who would otherwise find it difficult to engage with one another. The dialogic forms of communication encourage reflexive racialisation, continuous debate about the terms of engagement between Chinese people in Britain and the wider society. In addition, ethnicity is interwoven with other significant social identities in the discussions - notably gender and sexuality. The messages evidence the ongoing formation of post-colonial subjectivities, struggling to counter Orientalist constructions of Chinese culture and personhood in both everyday life and popular culture. These nascent subjectivities cannot be reduced to a diasporic homeland oriented consciousness, instead they are marked by the negotiation of affiliations to Britain, particular cities and neighbourhoods within it, as well as diverse family origins in East Asia.

The Internet can operate as a medium for civic engagement, often precisely because of, as well as in spite of, its informal atmosphere. Largely self-regulated forums such as the British Born Chinese and Dim Sum web sites create contexts for trust-building and sharing the felt experiences of marginalization and discrimination. Episodes of injustice highlighted by the British Born Chinese and Dim Sum web sites have emboldened some British

Chinese people to initiate social action, as well as generating friendships and networks of support, both on-line and off-line, to counter social isolation. However, episodic electronic petition signing, festival-time fund-raising and annual award ceremonies are only the start of a much longer-term development of British Chinese civil society.

The notion of social capital is helpful in understanding this emerging British Chinese public expression through the Internet. The idea captures the networking, trust-building and collective ethos facilitated by the web sites and their attendant interactions in the everyday lives of participants. Moreover the sites offer resources to those who merely 'lurk' without posting messages, their impact goes beyond the benefits derived by the visible contributors. However, some of the central formulations of social capital analysis require substantial modification if they are to illuminate British Chinese uses of the Internet. The instrumentalist approaches (Lin, 2001 for example) underplay the expressive dynamics and intrinsic value of Internet-mediated dialogue. The civic republican framework of Putnam (2000) and Uslaner and Conley (2003) is too narrowly drawn to encompass group-based aspirations that contest rather than conform to the prevailing social framework. Associational activity should not be valued purely in terms of whether or not it works through existing institutional channels. The

binary between bonding and bridging social capital fails to address the marginalised social location of groups like British Chinese young people, for whom the nurturing of strong intra-ethnic bonds and institutions may be a pre-requisite for interventions over a wider political field.

The specific social location of the second generation makes any social capital they create and utilise a complex mixture of bonding, bridging and linking social capital. The interaction between ethnicity and other social relations, and attempts to engage in wider social institutions mark the experiences of the British Chinese second generation, but this has yet to be adequately reflected in the application of social capital theory to the understanding of ethnicity. Future research should explore how these forms of second generation social capital may complement, as opposed to, replace, the other social ties held by site users. No account of ethnic identity formation today can afford to ignore the social networks facilitated by digital media, but the extent and form of the social capital created require more sophisticated concepts and analysis.

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The following web addresses were all operative as of 29<sup>th</sup> December 2005:

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Dim Sum [[www.dimsum.co.uk](http://www.dimsum.co.uk)]

Min Quan [[www.minquan.co.uk](http://www.minquan.co.uk)]

British Chinese Society [[www.britishchinese.org.uk](http://www.britishchinese.org.uk)]

Chinatown, the Magazine [[www.chinatownthemagazine.com](http://www.chinatownthemagazine.com)]

The Pearl Awards [[www.thepearlawards.org.uk](http://www.thepearlawards.org.uk)]

British Born Chinese Lesbian [[www.bbclesbian.co.uk](http://www.bbclesbian.co.uk)]

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