Inclusion, Participation and the Emergence of British Chinese Websites

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Previous work has drawn attention to the relative absence of British Chinese voices in public culture. 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 of them 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 forms of self-expression, collective identity production and social and political action. 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, issues which are usually overlooked in relation to a group which appears to be well integrated and successful in higher education.

Keywords: British Chinese; Internet; Inclusion; Political Participation; Collective Identities

The Marginalisation of the British Chinese

No one is more aware of the relative absence of British Chinese voices in public culture than British-born Chinese people themselves (Parker 1995; Song 1999). In this paper we examine British Chinese websites where important questions about inclusion and exclusion, citizenship, participation and the development of a sense of belonging in Britain are discussed. 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, 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 per cent of the total population—about 247,000, of whom 38 per cent are aged 16–34 (ONS 2002, 2005). 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 organisation, 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 becoming 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 who have entered into higher education and mainstream professional jobs (Francis and Archer 2005; 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 racialised small business sector will shape the development of the British Chinese population for decades to come (Chau and Yu 2001). A survey by the Guardian in early 2005 revealed the low level of ‘integration’ among Chinese people, who reportedly felt the least British among all minority groups in Britain.¹

Although aggregate statistics suggest that the Chinese in Britain are a success, there are real limits to what socio-economic indicators can tell us about inclusion and participation in the wider society, as revealed in the Internet discussions outlined below. These 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 co-ethnic 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 contributing to 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.BritishChineseOnline.com, and, to a lesser extent, www.dimsum.co.uk.

Our study is based on reading and analysing 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 all the threads in every discussion forum on these British Chinese websites, we have deliberately focused on the more serious and thoughtful threads. The informal banter surrounding these messages provides the context in which many serious debates can occur.

**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) which are widely used by minority second-generation Britons (Parker and Song 2006). Communication through the Internet connects scattered populations in previously unimagined ways both across and within national boundaries (Franklin 2003; Graham and Khosravi 2002). As 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 (Levitt 2001; Parham 2004). 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.

If ‘electronic media have become the privileged space of politics’ (Castells 1997: 311) then an exploration of 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 (Pajnik 2005; Sunstein 2001). 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 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. The standard portraits of ethnic minorities in Britain largely ignore their experiences.

The majority of the first generation of Chinese arrived in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, and most of them set up Chinese take-away and restaurant businesses in small towns, as well as in suburban and metropolitan areas. As a result, the Chinese are geographically extremely dispersed (Dorling and 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 websites like www.BritishChineseOnline.com 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 postwar decades. The proliferation of associational opportunities offered by the Internet—blogs, chatrooms, discussion forums, instant messaging, websites—has prompted discussions of a networked civil society (Barney 2004; Ester and Vinken 2003; Hassan 2004). For 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 online 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 online forums can develop into enduring social institutions. In this article we address these issues through analysis of two of the most widely used British Chinese Internet sites: www.BritishChineseOnline.com—referred to as the British Chinese Online site in
the remainder of this paper—and www.dimsum.co.uk, hereafter referred to as ‘Dimsum’.

**British Chinese Websites**

The British Chinese Online site—(known as BritishBornChinese.org.uk until its relaunch in July 2007) began in autumn 1999 as an offshoot of an existing website, Chinatown Online (www.chinatown-online.co.uk). One of the 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 Chinese Online site was formed. The home page of the original site reflected 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; accessed 1 March 2005).

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 British Chinese Online and Dimsum cannot be said to be representative of all sectors of the British Chinese population, such as elderly or undocumented Chinese migrants, or those without Internet access. While the users of these websites demonstrate genuine interest in any issues which concern Chinese people in Britain, the 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 of newly arrived Chinese migrants.

Since inception, the British Chinese Online site has attracted over 8,000 registered members, and its main activity relates to the online 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 June 2007, over one million 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 website 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 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 Chinese Online and Dimsum 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. 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, 24, by email).

The existence of public forums like these websites has offered the first media platform for ‘British Chinese’ to become a collective identity around which they have the potential to mobilise, 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) which is 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 (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 Chinese Online 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 Chinese Online site forums. Tropes of cultural loss, dilution and impurity circulate in regular exchanges about ‘mixed-race’ relationships and the fate of ‘mixed-race’ children.

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’, 18 February 2005).

This woman’s request for advice about starting a mixed family drew a variety of responses:

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’, 20 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’, 23 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’, 27 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’, 18 June 2001).

Site users sketch out a rationale for rethinking 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 incorporating 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’, 21 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 worldly 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 BBCs can begin to define their new cultural evolution (posted by ’dr g8’, 12 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 significance, if any, 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 website—the Chinese Nationalist Alliance (www.theasf.net/forums)—to post messages on the British Chinese Online 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’, 12 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 online petition calling on the United Nations to reject Japan’s bid for a permanent seat on the security council (posted by ‘watchdog’, 25 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’, 27 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’, 27 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 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’, 3 October 2005).

Respondents then 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’, 4 October 2005).

Racism, Integration and Belonging

Since the British Chinese Online 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 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 1,000 responses between April 2005 and September 2006.

The potential vulnerability of the Chinese catering worker was brought home in April 2005 when a take-away 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’, 29 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’, 30 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 7 July 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 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 as 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’, 12 July 2005).

But, as another poster 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’, 12 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],

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’, 14 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’, 14 July 2005).

At this point, another poster asserts: ‘Chinese people don’t deal with racism . . . And “they” could easily be you or me. “They” were brainwashed.’ (posted by ‘CharlieAddict’, 14 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’, 14 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 inter-ethnic alliances and cooperation among these groups.

The creation of Internet forums aimed at a small ethnic group like the British-born Chinese 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 the 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 online 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, action on the part of minority populations. A recent *Time* magazine cover story on ‘generation Jihad’ noted the fundamental significance of Internet website 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 2005).

Nothing of this order has thus far been stimulated by the British Chinese websites we have analysed. However, the British Chinese Online and Dimsum sites have generated forms of social networking and political mobilisation which connect online and offline interactions. For example, regular social gatherings of British Chinese Online site users occur in cities such as London (where an estimated 200 people gather each month), Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Bristol and Brighton. The Dimsum 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’, 3 April 2005).

The offline 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 28 March 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, Chinese businesses suffered a 40 per cent 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 website, along with an alliance of Chinese activists and business people, helped to organise a demonstration of several thousand British Chinese who marched through central London to the Ministry of Agriculture. This unprecedented demonstration secured a meeting with (and an 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 www.dimsum.co.uk, June 2004).

In another intervention, the British Chinese Online 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 Chinese Online site organised a formal letter of complaint to be signed by 17 Chinese organisations—this number marking the 17 million Chinese people who had died during the period of trade and the Opium Wars. Members of the British Chinese Online 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 online 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, 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 websites, other established British Chinese campaigning organisations have begun to utilise the Internet, and have been linked to the British Chinese Online forum, to enhance their work. For example the British Chinese civil rights action group, Min Quan, had an email petition protesting against the redevelopment of Chinatown, London in February 2005 (www.minquan.co.uk). Min Quan also launched an email petition protesting against racial attacks on 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 Dimsum website and users of the British Chinese Online 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 Dimsum and British Chinese Online websites, which attracted over 1,000 signatures to a petition sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Such examples demonstrate how sites like the British Chinese Online and Dimsum pages are not just ephemeral media texts, but are developing as social institutions in
their own right. The continuous availability of online 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 mobilisations for British-born Chinese people’s sense
of collective identity, empowerment, and, perhaps most importantly, visibility.

Conclusion

The growth of the British Chinese Online and Dimsum websites has not only greatly
enhanced the ability of British Chinese to connect with each other (online and
offline), but it has also engendered lively debate about their experiences of being
British Chinese, and in particular, about issues of ‘belonging’ and inclusion within
British society. The discussions reveal a recognition of both ‘British’ and ‘Chinese’ as
internally differentiated categories, whose relationship is being debated and redefined
by the lives explored through online 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 marginalisation 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 7 London bombings, and with 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 Chinese Online and Dimsum sites have also been instrumental in
encouraging public intervention on the part of a group which has been severely
under-represented in established political organisations.

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 Chinese Online 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 British Chinese organisations such as Min Quan, who are working on the behalf not only of vulnerable recent migrants, but also of Chinese victims of racist attacks. The British Chinese Online site has also indirectly generated other ways of linking British Chinese; for example, a former volunteer has been instrumental in setting up the British Chinese Society (www.britishchinese.org.uk). This is 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 some of the few available gathering points for British-born Chinese people. The relative longevity of the British Chinese Online site after eight years has fostered a sense of responsibility for, and collective ownership of, the website 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’, 25 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. Online discussion forums like the British Chinese Online 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, 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 online 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 the everyday experiences of racial discrimination faced by Chinese people in Britain.
These websites 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, and 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 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? 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. Thirdly, 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 Chinese Online and Dimsum websites 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 to 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 websites are enabling the emerging generation of British Chinese people to define its place in British society in its own terms for the first time.

Notes

[1] See Pai, *Guardian Unlimited*, 19 October 2005, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/china/story/0,1595480,00.html.
[2] 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.

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