

British Chinese Online Identities Research Report



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At the moment we're all individuals, we don't give a shit, there's no power as a community. Unlike the Blacks, the Asians, they get themselves together and they do exploit that opportunity (...) we're quiet, we don't say anything, we don't do anything. Especially my generation is very dispersed, there's no collective of being English born Chinese. For example this month is Black History Month, you will never get Yellow History Month! (Lau, aged 39, male)

What I've found with a lot of British born Chinese is that your friends are more your family than your family, so you kind of like hang out and you kind of like influence each other. We talk on Messenger and basically use all forms of communication (Jane, aged 20)

I know from my own experiences and of other people I've met, that this is something that the British Chinese people really need. I think it's almost like helping people find that space where they belong, in this case it's a virtual space, but this sense of belonging is terribly important, that there are other people like you, and that you're not alone, and if you want to, you can actually get to meet them. That is the great function that they provide for the British Chinese people. (Glen, aged 58)

I think living in London the past eight years has allowed me to embrace being British and Chinese. And I think the boom in the kind of British Chinese website and the events I've attended have really helped me to feel more comfortable in that identity. Whereas before, if I'd still been living in ---shire, it wouldn't have been the case because it's more isolating. (Miriam, aged 30)

British Chinese Online Identities

Context

Britain's long-established Chinese population is often held to be among the most successful ethnic minority communities. Yet apart from the presenter of *How to Look Good Naked* and the occasional reality television contestant the high economic and educational achievement of the British Chinese has yet to be reflected in the nation's public life. There are no Chinese Members of Parliament, only a handful of local councillors, and few decision-makers in high places. This lack of cultural visibility and political voice has been highlighted in the early years of the twenty-first century. A survey by the *Guardian* in early 2005 revealed the low level of integration among Chinese people in Britain, who reportedly felt the least British among all ethnic minority groups. The government's 2006 Citizenship Survey indicates that Chinese people in Britain are less likely to be volunteers than other ethnic groups, and the Electoral Commission found that they have very low voter registration.

In recent years the post-war British Chinese migrant population has been augmented by a rising number of undocumented migrants from mainland China. The double demographic transition of a growing and diversifying population and the emergence of a second generation keen to move away from the niche of catering makes an exploration of British Chinese social mobilisation timely. The dispersed settlement pattern of the British Chinese population makes conventional forms of mobilisation more difficult, but may make new communications technologies such as the Internet more significant for British Chinese relative to other minorities.

In this research study we explore the emergence of British Chinese websites and their potential to enhance the social inclusion and political participation of British Chinese people. These issues are usually overlooked in relation to a group which appears to be well integrated and successful. 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 (Evans 2008).

Aims of the Research

Our research sought to explore new forms of online participation such as discussion forums and web logs. The study was based on a survey of 283 users of British Chinese Internet sites and 42 in-depth interviews. The research addressed 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 focused specifically upon two of the most widely-used British Chinese websites, **www.britishchineseonline.com** and **www.dimsum.co.uk**.

Key findings

i) For many British Chinese users, access to the social networks and information resources on these sites provided a key means of meeting other British Born Chinese people ('BBCs'). 7% of survey respondents had made over 20 friends through their use of these Internet sites.

ii) These British Chinese Internet sites facilitated reflection on experiences of racism, minority status, and belonging, and provided an empathetic arena to reflect on the issues raised by living in a multicultural context. Discussion threads also encouraged debates about the British Chinese relationship to China, with a renewed sense of identification with the 'motherland' evident, particularly in the wake of the May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, and during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

iii) Participation on these Internet sites is creating an emergent British Chinese civil society, and is drawing a hitherto underrepresented group into the public domain. Various political initiatives have been mobilized via these websites, both online and offline. For instance, the British Chinese Project has liaised with these websites to push for the "Integration of the British Chinese Into Politics" (**www.bcproject.org.uk**). Both the Dimsum and British Chinese Online sites have been instrumental in highlighting the plight of earthquake victims in China and encouraging donations.

iv) The content and communications stimulated by these British Chinese Internet sites have not overcome a lack of understanding of, and engagement with, the formal political process among the British Chinese. Only 44% of the respondents in our survey vote regularly in national and local elections. 31% did not vote at all and only 1% had attended a political meeting or demonstration. Many respondents lacked a clear sense of how to participate in civic life, what the opportunities were, and how to find routes into the political process.

v) The websites and social networks we have explored in this research have the potential to draw together and mobilise a part of the population yet to be engaged with British social and political life. The possibilities of these new media forms should be explored by those institutions looking to reach this underrepresented population in the following ways:

- Devising online content setting out the pathways to political participation at local and national levels
- Tailoring invitations to public policy consultations in areas such as cohesion, immigration, education, health

British Chinese Online Identities: Inclusion and Participation

Background

Previous research has drawn attention to the cultural marginality of the British Chinese population (Parker and Song 2006a, 2006b) and their lack of representation in public life relative to their considerable economic and educational achievements (Francis and Archer 2005). The frustrations this can give rise to were graphically expressed by a respondent in our study:

At the moment we're all individuals, we don't give a shit, there's no power as a community. Unlike the Blacks, the Asians, they get themselves together and they do exploit that opportunity (...) we're quiet, we don't say anything, we don't do anything. Especially my generation is very dispersed, there's no collective of being English born Chinese. For example this month is Black History Month, you will never get Yellow History Month! (Lau, aged 39, male)

The sense of a British Chinese population largely absent from British civic life and public institutions is borne out in official statistics.

The 2006 Citizenship Survey indicates that Chinese people in Britain are less likely to be volunteers than other ethnic groups – only 17% of Chinese people engaged in formal voluntary activities at least once a month in 2005 compared to the average of 29% (DCLG 2006: 55). Rates of activism and political involvement were also low. In 2005 only 25% of Chinese people had engaged in civic participation (contacting a public body or elected representative, signing a petition, going on a demonstration), against an overall average of 38%. Only 2% had been involved in some form of civic activism (engaging in decision-making, for example as a councillor, magistrate or school governor), the lowest figure for any ethnic group (DCLG 2006: 89).

Given these statistics, this study is a timely exploration of the extent to which new media might help promote the political participation of a British Chinese generation often overlooked in debates about multiculturalism, social cohesion and changing cultural identities.

The research contributes to several further areas of debate in contemporary social science. Firstly, we augment discussions of the implications of new technology for social interaction. Some researchers have expressed concern over whether the Internet encourages fragmentation among ever more socially homogeneous enclaves (Sunstein 2007). Others emphasise the potential for the Internet to harness the power of networks and nurture new forms of association (Barney 2004; Castells 2000), drawing previously

marginalised minority communities such as youth (Loader 2007) and ethnic minorities (Siapera 2006, 2007) into public discourse. A strand of analysis in political communication (Dahlgren 2007) has explored the new forms of communicative competence and civic engagement that the Internet facilitates, enabling a more expansive public sphere of dialogue and deliberation:

In the information age, political participation is moving away from involvement in institutionalised activities organised by political parties, to a more flexible political participation through individualised access to information and electronic social interaction (Mesch and Coleman 2007: 47).

The ability of online communication to connect a dispersed population is particularly significant for the British Chinese, as unlike many other minority ethnic populations, they are highly scattered throughout Britain, with no local authority area having more than 2% of its residents as Chinese.

The second theme our work relates to is the growing research field of transnational practices and identities. This literature recognises how the growing traffic in both material and symbolic cultural cargoes has “qualitatively transformed the character of immigrant transnationalism, turning it into a far more dense and dynamic cross-border exchange than anything that would have been possible in earlier times” (Portes and DeWind 2007: 10-11). Our work bears comparison with studies of Internet use by the sizeable Asian American population in the United States (Lee and Wong 2003; Nakamura 2002, 2008) as well as the transnational Chinese migrant population (Ong 2003, Shi 2005). Our research also connects with a developing strand of literature on digital citizenship among ethnic minority youth in Europe (Brouwer 2006; D’Haenens, Koeman and Saeys 2007).

Thirdly the analysis of British Chinese Internet activity contributes to ongoing debates about the place of minority ethnic communities in Britain and the future of Britain as a multicultural society (Wetherell, Laflèche and Berkeley 2007). The relationship between community formation, social networks and social capital has become a major focus in this literature (Commission for Integration and Cohesion 2007; Hope Cheong et al 2007).

Our approach to social capital cautiously endorses the application of the metaphor to the British Chinese population (Parker and Song 2006b). As the literature on “segmented assimilation” in the United States argues, the success of the second generation depends on the resources that individuals, families and communities can mobilise (Portes and Zhou 1993). Because of the lack of a long history of social connections to powerful people and institutions in the country their parents moved to, the children of migrants can face higher hurdles in securing labour market positions commensurate with their education. In this circumstance, the desire to both find and forge

social networks with people of a similar background can become a major impulse for seeking co-ethnics online.

The benefits of specifically ethnic networks have not gone unquestioned. The potentially adverse consequences of social insularity have been analysed through Robert Putnam's binary of bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam 2000). Bonding social capital is the societal "superglue" that arises from talking and interacting with like-minded people. The gains possible from vesting trust in co-ethnics can be outweighed by confinement to safe, but marginal social locations. Exclusionary practices and an excessive degree of social closure along ethnic lines may prevent participation in wider channels beyond the in-group.

By contrast, bridging social capital cuts across social boundaries, is outer-directed and connects minorities to the mainstream. One reason suggested for minorities' persistent social exclusion is their low bridging social capital. However, for minority groups whose sense of group consciousness and political mobilization is still nascent (such as the British Chinese), 'bonding' capital must first be consolidated before bridging activities can be developed in relation to other groups and the mainstream (Parker & Song 2006b).

Furthermore, as our research demonstrates, a third dimension in the social capital discussions is of more significance – linking social capital. This refers to whether the resources available within a network connect to more powerful and strategically significant resources elsewhere, particularly those controlled by the state (Woolcock 1998). Linking social capital is a form of bridging social capital that relates to power, "a vertical bridge across asymmetrical power and resources" (Halpern 2005: 25).

There is still little research evidence available on patterns and practices of Internet use among minority ethnic communities in Britain. Knowledge about how Internet sites and forums develop identities, facilitate social gatherings and potentially mobilise political action may benefit policymakers seeking to reach particular ethnic constituencies.

Research Objectives

Our research had four main objectives:

- i) to explore how British Chinese people create and consume Internet content geared to their ethnic identities
- ii) to analyse the extent to which British Chinese Internet sites facilitated reflection on experiences of racism, belonging and provided an empathetic arena to reflect on the issues raised by living in a multicultural context

iii) to assess the extent to which the Internet was creating the infrastructure to constitute an emergent British Chinese civil society and drawing a hitherto underrepresented group into the public domain

iv) to generate policy proposals for agencies seeking to reach British Chinese people, particularly for those bodies concerned with increasing political participation

Research Methods

The research employed three data collection methods:

First, an online survey was administered via the main British Chinese community websites and completed by 283 respondents. The survey was online from October 2006 to February 2007, and linked to the two main British Chinese community websites, *British Chinese Online* and *Dimsum*.

The survey collected information on ethnic background, occupation, education levels, patterns of Internet use, social networking and political participation. Although mostly closed questions, a small number of open-ended questions were asked, and are drawn on below.

Second, we undertook follow-up interviews with 35 survey respondents who left their contact details on the survey form. We also held two group discussions in London, and one group discussion in Birmingham. To supplement these interviews and discussions with survey respondents, we selected a further seven figures involved in British Chinese public life as councillors, community representatives and volunteers. We did this to secure an account of how some of the most active British Chinese citizens entered public life. We also sought their views on the potential for online activity to augment the very small number of British Chinese political representatives and activists.

Third, throughout the course of the research we engaged in ongoing monitoring of the discussion forums on the sites originally specified in the application. We also tracked the emergence of new British Chinese Internet sites and campaigns during the research period of 2006-2008.

The Internet sites whose users we spoke to were in their late twenties and early thirties, making the average age of our respondents slightly older than expected. This older average age partly accounts for the relative lack of emphasis on *My Space*, *Facebook* and other social networking sites such as *bebo* in the interviews with survey respondents.

Survey Results

Age and gender profile of the respondents

The gender profile of survey respondents from the two sites was very similar, with slightly more female users on both sites – thus refuting the widespread notion that Internet surfing is a predominantly male activity. The age profile of the two sites is similar, but *Dimsum* users were on average 5 years older than users of the *British Chinese Online* site.

Dimsum site:

Gender profile: 46% male, 54% female

Age profile: average age 33 years old

British Chinese Online site:

Gender profile: 49% male, 51% female

Age profile: average age 27 years old

Partly because our respondents had a mean age in the late twenties and early thirties, their educational qualifications are significantly above the figures for the Chinese population as a whole. By highest qualification, 47% in our survey had, or were studying for, a first degree, 31% had, or were studying for, a Masters degree or above.

British Chinese Internet content

Our searches of the Internet revealed three kinds of specifically British Chinese content. Firstly, websites and weblogs, secondly, interactive forums such as *British Chinese Online* and *Dimsum*, thirdly, institutions and interventions such as the websites for existing Chinese community bodies and new campaigns such as the Chinese Immigration Concern Committee and the British Chinese Project we outline below.

Websites and web logs

Of our survey respondents, 34% kept a weblog (blog) or personal web site, though it is possible that this figure is higher (not all respondents would reveal this information).

There is a distinction between personal weblogs which simply chart the daily lives of individuals who happen to be British Chinese and those which are fashioned to specifically reflect on the experience of being of Chinese origin. Examples of these self-professed British Chinese blogs include *The British Born Chinese blog* which describes itself as "Past, present and future from a British born Chinese point of view" (**british-chinese.blogspot.com**).

This distinctive British born Chinese viewpoint is expressed in a number of ways, for example a series of images "Frozen in Time" tries to capture the

longevity of the British Chinese suburban catering establishment as a means of asserting the embeddedness of a Chinese presence in Britain's everyday life. Collective memory is also evoked by the blog's extensive posting of images of, and reflections on, Hong Kong, the country of origin of most British Chinese.

British Chinese performers and creative professionals keep *My Space* sites and personal weblogs to represent their work. An example is "Madam Miaow says" belonging to the performer Anna Chen (**madammiaow.blogspot.com**). The iconography and site design connotes Chinese heritage recalling Mao's red book and Chinese film stars of the past, but the blog's content includes articles discussing contemporary Chinese politics and contesting stereotypical media representations.

British Chinese designers also present their work and cultural observations online, for example the site One Inch Punch, produced by Mark Wu, includes a visually rich presentation of aspects of East Asian culture (**www.oneinchpunch.net**). Wu also produces Visible Chinese, a site devoted to biographies of successful British Chinese in a variety of fields. (**www.visiblechinese.com**)

The sharpest online exponent of a British Chinese sensibility is Squat Magazine. The editorial statement resolves to counteract the superficial appropriations of East Asian culture in food, fashion and furniture:

Squat came about after, in light of the most electrifying era of far-eastern mash culture in history unfolding, a bunch of guys and girls took a look at the English-language "Chinese" content that was on offer. The bunch of guys and girls realized what an f-ing load of pap was out there (...) It was enough to make the bunch of guys and girls wonder if every Chinese person on the planet was in fact a middle-aged white woman, cooking Amoy Straight-To-Wok in the evenings, hanging random Chinese characters on walls because Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen said so and rubbing Tiger Balm on eczema. Horrified by the farce, the bunch of guys and girls founded Squat and vowed: "Now Squat is here, things are going to change." (Squat Magazine Editorial Statement September 2006 batgwa.com/squat/contact.php?mediainfo&issueId=1)

Interactive forums and social networks

The second form of British Chinese Internet activity encompasses interactive forums where contact and communication are what matter. Over the course of the research period, the two sites which hosted the survey continued to operate and attract new users. Both sites host online discussions, conducted almost entirely in English.

The British Chinese Online site has hosted over 1.1 million messages on its discussion board since its inception in 1999. It has over 7,000 registered members who post messages on twenty four themed discussion channels about aspects of everyday life, views on politics, and the experience of being British Chinese. The site's members have also been active in organising regular social gatherings through this forum.

The Dim Sum site began in 2000 and attracts 15,000 unique visitors a month. In contrast to the British Chinese Online site, its main content is user-submitted articles about British Chinese and East Asian culture and politics. Examples of subjects discussed include the meaning of the Beijing Olympics for British Chinese and critical reviews of press coverage of China. The Dim Sum site also has open discussion forums, and has begun arranging social networking events. These differences between the sites are reflected in slightly different patterns of usage.

While 44% of survey respondents on the *British Chinese Online* site visited the site about once a month, the remaining 56% used the website much more heavily, with about 30% using the site at least once daily, to an extreme of 5 or more times a day.

By comparison, only 18% of the *Dim Sum* survey respondents were regular or frequent users of the site, with about 80% visiting the site once to several times a month. Most users on both sites spent no more than 30 minutes on the site when they did visit the site, though a small minority used the sites for several hours at a time. There were few statistically significant differences in usage patterns between male and female respondents, although males were more likely to use the sites every day.

There was a statistically significant positive relationship between the number of messages posted on the sites and the number of new friends made through the site. The sites had made an important difference to the friendship patterns of many of our respondents:

- 30% of respondents had attended a social event organised via the sites
- 13% of respondents had made 10 or more friends through their use of the sites
- 7% of respondents had made 20 or more friends.

These figures show how these two British Chinese Internet sites are important for creating and sustaining networks of friends for a group of young people who often feel socially isolated. One of our respondents from an older generation of British Chinese could compare what it was like being Chinese prior to the Internet opening up new channels of communication:

I know from my own experiences and of other people I've met, that this is something that the British Chinese people really need. I think it's almost like helping people find that space where they belong, in this case it's a virtual space, but this sense of belonging is terribly important, that there are other people like you, and that you're not alone, and if you want to, you can actually get to meet them. That is the great function that they provide for the British Chinese people. (Glen, aged 58)

A younger respondent amplifies:

What I've found with a lot of British born Chinese is that your friends are more your family than your family, so you kind of like hang out and you kind of like influence each other. We talk on Messenger and basically use all forms of communication (Jane, aged 20)

But although this interviewee was a prolific contributor to the British Chinese forum, having posted over 3,500 messages, she was adamant that computer-mediated communication was no substitute for meeting face to face:

I think to be a friend you'd have to meet them face-to-face because, there's a certain intimacy to talking to someone face-to-face, to giving them a certain bond, to form that friendship bond and I don't think that you can get that through the Internet (Jane, aged 20)

The potential for the sites to draw individuals together and generate social networks arises through the regular social gatherings and meetings publicised via the sites. The British Chinese Online site has a social gathering in London on the first Saturday of each month. Meetings are held in other British and East Asian cities with British Chinese populations, notably Hong Kong where a monthly meeting is a regular fixture.

The Dim Sum web site has organised several networking events in London, for example one held in December 2007 with the theme of the creative industries attracted over 100, and enabled artists and performers to meet one another and representatives from funding bodies such as the Arts Council. The social events organised by the web sites are crucial in overcoming the isolation from other British Chinese people felt by respondents:

I think living in London the past eight years has allowed me to embrace being British and Chinese. And I think the boom in the kind of British Chinese website and the events I've attended have really helped me to feel more comfortable in that identity. Whereas before, if I'd still been living in ---shire, it wouldn't have been the case because it's more isolating. (Miriam, aged 30)

These meetings facilitate networking with professionals in fields not usually associated with Chinese people in Britain:

I was quite pleasantly surprised that there was another Oriental guy who was a graphic designer as well, and it took him a while to establish himself, but he had links of his work, so that was quite interesting to view for myself. For that confirmed that Chinese people could do that kind of thing. (Choi Ling, aged 26)

A recurrent theme on the sites is the experience of racial discrimination in everyday life, on the street, at work or in media representations. The messages posted on the British Chinese Online forum offer advice on how to deal with racial discrimination and harassment ranging from emotional empathy to legal advice to online petitions in support of the victims.

Many interviewees bemoaned the lack of a concerted collective response to such experiences:

I think the British Chinese are very quiet about any discrimination. They do not say anything about it. I think there is a lot of discrimination, both from the mainstream and other ethnic minorities, but I think the British Chinese don't bother saying anything about it, they just accept it, and go along as if nothing's happened (Mylene, aged 20)

(Re)attachments to China

In the course of the research, the rise of China became a more prominent theme in discussions on the British Chinese and Dim Sum web sites. Controversy over events in Tibet in spring 2008 and the disruption of the Olympic torch relay in London in April 2008 sparked considerable debates about media coverage on the sites. For some, the response was a rediscovery of a specifically China-related Chinese identity. This is in marked contrast to the British Chinese interviewed in the early 1990s (Parker 1995; Song 1999). At that stage prior to the return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule in 1997, many British Chinese young people were fearful of China, and anxious to distance themselves from the mainland.

This new sensibility of (re)emphasising Chinese roots and taking pride in a resurgent China, was emphasised in a discussion thread initiated on the British Chinese Online forum by Paul Ho, 'Speak up for yourselves about the Olympics'. He linked to a message he had posted on the comments section of the Daily Telegraph newspaper:

To people of Chinese origin like myself raised in the west, Chinese hosting of the Olympic games symbolises the progress and economic

development of China achieved since the restoration of stability in the 1970s, and the final emergence from the dark and sad times of past generations. I am proud of the Olympic games being held in Beijing yet if the protesters and the simplistic reporting by the media is to be believed, being proud puts me fairly and squarely in the "pro-Beijing" camp (as opposed to being "proud to be Chinese") and by default I am deemed to be supporting the 'brutal' oppression of human rights and the 'brutal occupation' of Tibet (posted by 'Paul Ho', British Chinese online discussion forum, 10th April 2008).

In a different thread, another site user expressed this new orientation to China:

I was born in Hong Kong and have never felt emotional attachment to China before, but what happened recently and the biased/untrue reporting in our media really angered (...) I think China is hugely misunderstood and mis-reported. If anything, this China bashing campaign has made me feel a sense of belonging to China (posted by 'malamala', British Chinese online discussion forum, 11th April 2008).

Such emotional connections to China were amplified a few weeks later in the aftermath of the earthquake on May 12th 2008 in Sichuan province. Images of wrecked buildings and bereaved parents were disseminated via the British Chinese Online forum, including links to footage not seen on British television, but available via Chinese news channels and *YouTube*. Internet-based fund-raising initiatives were established by British Chinese young people moved by the plight of the earthquake victims, for example "Make A Tomorrow" (**make-a-tomorrow.blogspot.com**).

The upsurge of long-distance compassion was also demonstrated by a group of Chinese community organisations collecting funds in London's Chinatown on successive Sundays in May 2008 to collect donations for earthquake victims, raising £70, 000 on the first day alone (**www.bcproject.org.uk**). This represents the third form of British Chinese Internet activity, the websites of community organisations and campaign groups.

British Chinese civil society: Institutions and interventions

One of the participating organisations in the earthquake fund-raising efforts was the British Chinese Project. This was established in autumn 2006 by a leading British Chinese lawyer. Subtitled "Integration of the British Chinese Into Politics", the BC Project seeks to "elevate the presence of the UK Chinese community in the British political arena" to achieve a "fair, just and inclusive democracy for the Chinese people in Britain" (**www.bcproject.org.uk**).

The project stemmed from a feeling of gross under-representation in positions of political power. In 2006 there were only 5 Chinese local councillors in England (Local Government Association 2007), and no Chinese Member of Parliament has ever been elected.

The British Chinese Project has joined with a range of British Chinese bodies to form "Get Active" -- a campaign to increase voter registration and political awareness among the British Chinese population (www.getactive.uk.com). The need for this initiative is illustrated by an estimate that just under one-third of Britain's Chinese population does not even register to vote (Electoral Commission 2005: 31).

Our survey data reinforce this perception of low participation rates in formal party politics. When asked, 'Do you vote in general and local elections?', 44% replied that they voted regularly, 25% sometimes, 31% not at all.

When asked, 'Which party would you vote for in a general election tomorrow?' 25% said they would vote Conservative, 19% for Labour and 19% for the Liberal Democrats, followed by 7.8% for the Greens. Notably, of those who replied 52 people (25.5%) said they would not vote at all.

While the voting patterns of users did not differ significantly across the two sites in our survey, users of the two sites did differ in their reported participation in voluntary or charitable work, with Dimsum users (34%) reporting more involvement in such work, in comparison with (19%) of British Chinese Online users. It is possible that this difference in participation is linked with the older age profile of the Dimsum users as well.

In the course of our research the government proposed a change to the immigration laws, with a new points system suggested. The potential constraints this would place on the flow of migrant labour into the Chinese catering trade became the catalyst for the formation of the Chinese Immigration Concern Committee (www.ciccuk.org). Although not primarily an online campaign, its Internet site and use of E-mail was highlighted by one interviewee - a Chinese local councillor:

They're going to have a demonstration in Trafalgar Square organised by the Chinese Immigration Concern Committee this Sunday (...) and they've just done it over the Internet this week (...) So the Internet is part of today's game, whether politically or socially. So we should learn to harness that, whether it's through websites or blogs, or as a politician through a collection of E-mail addresses because it puts you ahead.

The interplay between Internet content, communication and social action for such organisations is still being worked out. The online social networks of the second generation British Chinese have yet to develop into a sustained campaigning organisation around the rights of the undocumented migrant

Chinese workers highlighted in recent literature (Pai 2008). However, there are new connections being made between the British born Chinese, Chinese community organisations and mainstream public institutions. For example the London Chinatown Chinese community centre used a message on the British Chinese Online forum to recruit volunteers for its summer youth club.

The British Chinese Project has hosted events at Westminster through the All Party Parliamentary Chinese in Britain Group, and with the Chinese Immigration Concern Committee has been involved in lobbying the government around the proposed changes to immigration law. The Project is also working with the Department for Communities and Local Government to develop an internship programme for British Chinese young people. Although valuable in developing linking social capital that connects the British Chinese to decision-making bodies, such small-scale initiatives have yet to tap into the full potential of the social networks available via the online forums.

As one respondent argued, because of the low participation base, the Internet has proportionately more significance as a forum for representation among the British Chinese:

It's kind of empowering, it empowers people who otherwise don't have a voice. Now the Chinese are the archetypal people who don't have a voice, so therefore if this (*the Internet*) is their only outlet, then of course it takes on a huge meaning (Hugh, 39)

The meaning of these sites to their users offers at least three kinds of largely unexplored potential:

- for linking between existing Chinese community groups and the emerging generation of British Chinese to bring their professional skills to bear on the voluntary sector
- for linking between British Chinese interested in policy and politics and the major civic institutions at both national and local levels
- for linking the British Chinese to the new Chinese migrant population within Britain and the wider Chinese diaspora

Conclusion

The Internet sites we have explored in this study have made a significant impact on the lives of the British born Chinese who read and contribute to them. The meetings and social networks generated by these sites have drawn together and mobilised a part of the population yet to be engaged with British political life. They have connected a hitherto dispersed population, offered occasional interventions in public debates and developed the communicative infrastructure for a British Chinese public sphere. What

they have yet to do is overcome the wider structural forces hampering extensive political participation.

Our research has revealed two significant absences in linking social capital for the British Chinese. Firstly, the relative paucity of connections between British born Chinese and the more recent migrants from mainland China, although there is some evidence of messages on the sites displaying a greater willingness to empathise with mainland China. Secondly, the content of the sites has not overcome a lack of understanding of, and engagement with, the formal political process. Only 6% of our respondents had signed an online petition, and only 1% had attended a political meeting or demonstration. Many respondents lacked a clear sense of how to participate in politics, what the opportunities were and where to find the routes to express their interests:

If there's an opportunity, then I'd love to volunteer and do whatever's good for anyone. But I can't see...I can't channel, I can't find anything that will motivate me to do that. For example, a lot of the (Chinese) voluntary work seems to be caring for the elderly or mental health issues, there's nothing that excites me (Alan, aged 33).

We endorse a recent study of young people and the Internet: "one must remain cautious as to whether these networked weak ties truly merit the label of 'community', for it is unclear that such connection leads them to political or civic engagement either on or offline" (Livingstone, Couldry and Markham 2007: 22). However, although the path from online activity to political engagement is not automatic, there are new routes in place, such as the British Chinese Project and Get Active, which have begun to draw the British Chinese into the political arena. Given such initiatives it is oversimplistic to assume that co-ethnic activity is *a priori* unhelpful to the course of social cohesion in a multicultural society (Fennema and Tillie 2008; Nannestad, Svendsen and Svendsen 2008). The dearth of political knowledge and engagement felt by most young people is compounded for the British Chinese by a lack of family experience in the British political system. This makes it all the more important for information and support tailored to, and delivered through, the communications channels established by the sites we have highlighted.

One British Chinese local councillor, who was elected to office at the age of 23 in 2006, saw the Chinese themselves as reluctant to participate in formal channels:

The Chinese in Britain, although successful in many trades and professions do not seem to integrate as much as other ethnic counterparts. It appears that the Chinese in Britain are disinterested in cohesion, this is based on the type of jobs they take e.g. accountancy, medicine and law. Whilst these are respected professions, they seem

content on progressing within their careers paths, it is rare that the Chinese in Britain are interested in working within the public sector or joining decision making panels (...) The lessons to learn are the Chinese in Britain must learn to integrate with mainstream culture and employment in the public sector to ensure that society accurately reflects the population in Britain (Chinese local councillor, aged 25)

However, the onus needs placing at least as much on whether those in power are reaching out to those without it. In the past the Northern Ireland Police Service and Metropolitan Police have advertised vacancies on these British Chinese sites, but no government body has used them, for example, to invite responses to consultations on policies impacting on the Chinese population, notably the proposed immigration changes.

Institutions looking to reach the underrepresented British Chinese population should explore the possibilities of these Internet sites in the following ways:

- Devising online content setting out the pathways to political participation at local and national levels
- Tailoring invitations to public policy consultations in areas such as cohesion, immigration, education, health

The social networks and social capital generated by British Chinese Internet sites are valuable resources with the potential to help overcome the absence of this emerging generation from Britain's public life.

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Selected British Chinese Websites

Online commentary and forums

British Chinese Online
www.britishchineseonline.com

Dim Sum
www.dimsum.co.uk

British Chinese Society
www.bcs.org.uk

Organisations and campaigns

Chinese Immigration Concern Committee
www.ciccuk.org

British Chinese Project
www.bcproject.org.uk

Get Active UK
www.getactive.uk.com

Chinese Information and Advice Centre
www.ciac.co.uk

Chinese in Britain Forum
www.cibf.co.uk

Web logs, online magazines and personal sites

Madam Miaow Says
Madammiaow.blogspot.com

British Chinese Blog
british-chinese.blogspot.com

Squat Magazine
batgwa.com/squat

One Inch Punch
www.oneinchpunch.net

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