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The Internet and the rise of a transnational Chinese cultural sphere

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With the increasing speed and volume of the global circulation of cultural products and events, the rise of transnational public spheres becomes a possibility. This possibility has been explored by scholars interested in diaspora studies and transnational activism. Jackie Smith, for example, writes that the participation of transnational social movement organizations in international politics 'helps enfranchise individuals and groups that are formally excluded from participation in international institutions' and 'strengthens the global public sphere by mobilizing this disenfranchised public into discussions of global issues, thereby democratizing the global political process' (1988: 102). Anastasia Panagakos's (1998) study of a political rally held by Greek Canadians in Calgary, Alberta, shows that political mobilization 'was a product of technologically mediated ties that linked Calgary's Greek community with other political and cultural organizations of the Greek state'. In her study of TV dramas and pop music, Mayfair Yang describes 'a deterritorialized Chinese subjectivity that cannot be contained by the state apparatuses of either mainland China or Taiwan' (1997: 309), noting that 'there is something implicitly oppositional about the new media' (1997: 310). Finally, in an article on diasporic Chinese literature, Zhang Zhen (1999) shows how a literary journal founded in Beijing during the 1978–9 Democracy Wall Movement continues its operation in the USA, where it provides a space for 'risk-taking' Chinese writers.

Despite the rising interest in the possibility of transnational public spheres, the concept remains more often invoked than thematized. Little is known about the nature, dynamics and political functions of an existing transnational public sphere. This hinders our ability to understand an

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important new component of today's social and political processes. This article maps one such transnational public sphere, which I will call the online Chinese cultural sphere. This sphere is Internet-based. It is a Chinese *cultural* sphere in two senses. First, the dominant language of communication here is Chinese, although other languages are also used. Second, its publics are mainly drawn from what Tu Wei-ming (1994) calls 'cultural China'.[1] The concept of 'cultural China' refers to the interactions of three symbolic universes, the first consisting of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, the second of other ethnic Chinese communities around the world, and the third of individuals (such as teachers and journalists) who try to understand China intellectually and bring their understanding to their own communities. Far from presuming that all the population in the three universes is connected to the Internet or is at all interested in things Chinese, I view the three universes as the potential pool from which the emerging online Chinese cultural sphere draws its publics.[2]

In this article, I will analyze the basic elements, dynamics and political functions of this online Chinese cultural sphere. Its basic elements are two kinds of online spaces, non-interactive spaces in the form of online magazines and newsletters, and interactive spaces such as chatrooms, listservs, newsgroups and bulletin board systems (BBSs). In analyzing the dynamics of this online sphere, I will concentrate on the similarities, differences and connections between bulletin boards located in mainland China and North America. In considering its political functions, I will demonstrate its influences on transnational politics and on civil society in China. The picture that emerges from this analysis is a conceptual map of an emerging online Chinese cultural sphere. I will discuss three conditions of its emergence in the conclusion.

Conceptualizing a transnational public sphere

There is some risk in talking about an Internet-based transnational public sphere, because the concept of the public sphere is heavy with import. A caveat is thus in order. In this article, I use the concept in the broadest and most innocuous sense possible. I think of a public sphere as an open space for communication. The openness is relative and may be subject to contestation, but a space may be considered at least nominally open if it does not explicitly bar certain groups of people on the basis of their categorical identities. A roadside café is thus an open space; a private home normally is not. It is also important to conceive of public sphere as an ideal type, which has many undesirable features in reality. With this caveat in mind, it may be further proposed that the ideal public sphere should be a sphere for democratic participation. The criteria for democratic participa-

tion may be many, but three are central for Internet users. They are equal access to Internet technology and Internet culture, equal voice in stating one's perspective and being heard, and reflective dialogue in exploring social concerns (Kurland and Egan, 1996).

A public sphere has four basic elements: (1) publics; (2) spaces where publics may assemble for communication; (3) media of communication, such as newspapers and books; and (4) discourses. While essentially Habermasian, my conception of the public sphere puts most emphasis on its dimension of 'free spaces'. These are not just spaces for rational debate in the Habermasian sense, but also for public expression and social interaction (Benhabib, 1995), collective identity building (Hetherington, 1996; Calhoun, forthcoming), and civic association and popular protest (Evans and Boyte, 1986; Polletta, 1999).

As commonly used in the social science literature, the public sphere is a state-centric concept. It is typically conceptualized as an intermediate sphere between the private realm and the state, and its key political function is to protect citizens' rights and resist the encroachments of state power. Its target is the state. Nevertheless, the concept may be easily extended for a discussion of transnational public sphere. Thus, a transnational Chinese cultural sphere will refer to transnational communicative spaces. Its political functions may be located both within and across nation-state borders.

Guerrilla ethnography: a note on methodology

To understand Chinese cultural spaces on the Internet, I have taken on the role of a 'guerrilla ethnographer' over the past two years. The nature of the Internet is such that one cannot select a few sites and spend a year or two doing ethnographic field work there. That might be a good way of developing a tunnel vision of the Internet spaces, but it prevents the researcher from capturing the real strengths of the Internet: openness, fluidity and connections. A more effective approach is to be flexible and open-minded. Enter the sites with a mind free of preconceptions. Get involved but be ready to move around in the networks. Explore links. Take abundant notes, download information and, when appropriate, post questions and solicit answers. Sit back and think about the larger picture. Return to selected sites for deeper explorations. Supplement such ethnographic data with other available sources (such as survey data). These are some of the tasks of an online guerrilla ethnographer and, in this role, I have collected the data that provide the basis for mapping the online Chinese cultural spaces.

Online Chinese cultural spaces

The basic elements of the online Chinese cultural sphere are the Internet-based Chinese cultural spaces. Chinese is the dominant mode of communication in most of these spaces, although English is used in some. I will discuss three major types of these Internet spaces, namely, portal sites, newsgroups and online magazines, and bulletin boards. They are supported on servers located both inside and outside of China, and, technically speaking, accessible from any networked computer in the world.

Portal sites

A portal site is a starting web-site connected to other resources on the web. It typically contains a directory of web-sites, search functions, news, weather information, an email service, stock quotes, and discussion forums and community clubs in the form of online bulletin boards. In March 2001, the Hong Kong-based Internet survey company iamasia.com released a report about the top Internet domains and properties in Greater China – Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China. The ranking is based on the total number of home audience members for each domain or property in February 2001.[3] It shows that Yahoo! domains drew the largest regional audience of any company – 8.7 million people in all. The next four top-ranking properties are Sina.com, Microsoft.com, Sohu.com and Netease-.com, each with a home audience ranging from about 5 million to close to 8 million.

The top three of these five properties, Yahoo!, Sina and Microsoft, all have separate Chinese-language portal sites for Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China, while Sina has an additional Chinese site for North America. Sohu and Netease have domains in mainland China only. These Chinese-language portals have two common features. First, while commercial in nature, they offer a variety of free services, including online clubs and discussion forums. Second, while they each target a regional audience, they all provide links to its other regional sites. Thus, if one opens the Chinese homepage of Yahoo!, chinese.yahoo.com, one will see links to all of Yahoo!'s regional sites, including its Chinese sites in Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China. These two features combine to make these portal sites literally portals to the world. Internet users from different parts of the world may meet and talk in their online clubs and discussion forums. Users who start from one portal site may easily find themselves lured to others. A user in mainland China may read and discuss news in Yahoo!'s Taiwan site, tw.yahoo.com, and vice versa. Chinese-language portal sites thus provide the backbone for a transnational Chinese cultural sphere.

Newsgroups and online magazines

The size and diversity of newsgroups and online magazines are harder to capture. A look at some available figures may give some idea. On 3 July 2001, I accessed the newsgroup server at the University of California-Berkeley (agate.Berkeley.edu) and downloaded a total of 11,652 newsgroups. A key word search of 'Chinese' retrieved 29 Chinese-language newsgroups. They include the popular alt.Chinese.text and alt.cnd.Chinese-magazine. ChinaSite.com, the 'Complete Reference to China/Chinese-Related Web-sites', lists 69 commonly used China-related newsgroups.

Besides newsgroups, there are many online magazines in Chinese or about China and the Chinese diaspora. They cover a wide range of topics and are distributed in diverse regions of the world. Cathay.net, for example, listed a total of 209 online Chinese-language magazines as of 18 March 2001. Xys.org had a collection of 81 as of 4 January 2000. The earliest of these was set up in April 1991. As of 3 July 2001, 53 of the 81 magazines were still functioning. Most of these were published in North America, though a fair number were in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and several European countries. Table 1 shows the geographical distribution of the 53 online magazines.

The earliest Chinese online magazines were set up in the early 1990s by Chinese students in North America. They were often based in a university. Some of these disappeared after a while; others have persisted; still others have evolved into influential non-profit organizations or commercial portal sites. Among the best-known online magazines are *Olive Tree* (wenxue.com) and *China News Digest* (cnd.org). Both are now non-profit organizations based in the United States. *Olive Tree* is a literary monthly founded in 1995. Its mission is 'to establish a mass media outlet for new literary works and culture commentaries in Chinese, a platform with a lot less political, social and economic restrictions normally associated with mass market'.[4] Its editors are volunteers dispersed across the world, mainly in

TABLE 1
Geographical distribution of 53 online Chinese magazines, 3 July 2001

Region	No. of Magazines
Canada and the United States	20
China	14
Europe	8
Hong Kong and Taiwan	8
Australia	2
Japan	1
Total	53

Source: http://www.xys.org/magazines.html, retrieved 3 July 2001.

mainland China and North America. They claim no identification with any nation-state. With a monthly readership of about 60,000, it may be subscribed to by email or accessed on the web.

China News Digest (*CND*) was launched on 6 March 1989 by four Chinese students in Canada and the United States. Originally published only in English and intended as a communication network for Chinese students in North America, *CND* has developed into a global network with English-language news services, a weekly Chinese-language online magazine, discussion forums and several online archives of significant historical events in Chinese history, including archives on China's Cultural Revolution and the democracy movement in 1989. Its readership has been growing steadily. When it was first set up in 1989, *CND* had only 400 subscribers, all in Canada and the United States. By 1999, it had about 50,000 subscribers in 111 different countries or regions of the world. Table 2 shows the growth of *CND* readership from 1989 to 1999.

The first online magazine in mainland China, *China's Scholars Abroad*, was set up in 1995 by the then China Education Commission to provide information to Chinese students and scholars abroad. Currently, the most influential online magazines in China are of two kinds. One kind may be called magazines of ideas or intellectual magazines. Often run by individuals, they cover an extremely broad range of topics, with special focus on critical public issues in contemporary China, such as citizenship education. The writings published in them are usually essayistic, individualistic and full of critical acumen.[5] These magazines often have discussion forums and are well linked with one another and sometimes to influential English-language publications. For example, on 5 August 2001, I visited

TABLE 2
***CND* readership, 1989–99**

Period	Subscribers	Countries and regions
March 1989	400	2
March 1990	16,000	N/A
March 1993	24,148	30
March 1994	34,281	40
March 1995	35,200	50
March 1997	47,600	63
March 1999	57,120*	111

Source: CND, 6 March 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1999.

*This number is based on my estimate. According to *CND*, it had 47,600 subscribers among an estimated total readership of 150,000 in 1997. *CND* estimated that its readership had reached 180,000 by March 1999, but did not publish the number of subscribers. Given that 47,600 accounts for 31.7% of a readership of 150,000, it can be inferred that of a readership of 180,000, 31.7%, or 57,120, are subscribers.

the web-site of a magazine called *Reading* (www.dushu.net) and found links to 39 other related online magazines. In the web-site for *Century China* (http://www.csdn618.com.cn/century/index.htm), I found links to 18 Chinese online magazines and 10 English sites, including *Foreign Affairs*, *Social Text* and *Dissent*.

The other kind of online magazine in mainland China is literary. The best known of these, *Banyan Tree* (www.rongshu.com), was founded in 1997. Together with the US-based *Olive Tree*, these two are known as the 'two trees' of online Chinese literature. As of May 2001, *Banyan Tree* had published over 380,000 pieces of original literature – all available online, with a daily page-view of more than 5.5 million. Besides such brand names as *Banyan Tree*, there are numerous other online literary or non-literary magazines in China. Recently, a Taiwan-based dotcom company (www.maillist.com.tw) started an online magazine service in Beijing, bj.mail163.com. Within a matter of months, more than 100 magazines were set up in the Beijing web-site. A look at the top 10 of these online magazines shows how fast the readership grows. A weekly called *No. 1 Magazine* attracted 20,636 subscribers within the first month of its publication, with a total distribution of 99,397. Table 3 summarizes the information for the top 10 online magazines at bj.mail163.com founded between 14 May and 15 June 2001.

Bulletin board systems (BBS)

While online magazines and newsgroups are large in number and readership, bulletin boards are where the action is. Chinese-language BBSs exist in large numbers both inside and outside mainland China. In China, many commercial portal sites, official media web-sites and university web-sites

TABLE 3
Top 10 online magazines at bj.mail163.com as of 15 June 2001

Title of magazine	Date set up (2001)	Subscribers	Total distribution
No. 1 Magazine	15 June	20,636	99,397
News about Zhang Huimei	8 June	873	30,712
The Exotic and Strange	20 May	6,442	24,347
China	14 May	2,394	21,003
e-Net Boundless	18 May	641	16,952
Sea Wind Net Weekly	20 May	567	6,534
Northern Telecommunications Industry	27 May	763	6,458
Book Lovers	15 June	1,116	4,848
Net English	20 May	578	3,402
Wisdom Hut	18 May	1,134	2,938

TABLE 4
Number of BBSs in selected web-sites, 11 April 2001

	Website	No. of BBSs
Portal sites	Chinaren.com	33
	Netease.com	300+
	Sina.com	96
	263.com	80
Web sites with	Creaders.net	244
rankings of	Geocities.com	103
world-wide	Cwrank.com	30
Chinese BBSs	Topforum.com	60
Total		946

maintain BBSs. Individuals or groups have BBSs on free or leased web space. Outside mainland China, BBSs are often supported by commercial portal sites, non-profit organizations or educational institutions. Table 4 presents a sample of BBSs supported or listed in selected web-sites.

The list is far from complete. It includes only four of the dozens of popular portal sites in China, each of which maintains online communities with dozens or even hundreds of BBSs. It has left out the numerous BBSs in Taiwan entirely.[6] Nor does the list show the dynamics in individual forums. I discuss the dynamics in the next section.

The dynamics in bulletin board systems: a study of four cases

BBSs are usually organized around thematic categories, such as sports, music, education, science and technology, art and literature, news, politics and the like. The four BBSs I selected are news and politics forums, because of my interest in the political functions of the transnational Chinese cultural sphere. Table 5 shows the basic information about the four bulletin boards.

As Table 5 shows, two of the forums are based in China, two in North America. One of the forums in China, the 'Strengthening the Nation Forum' (QGLT), is affiliated with the official newspaper *People's Daily*; the other, 'Beida Online', is a joint venture between Beijing University and an IT (information technology) company. The North American forums belong to two top-ranking commercial portal sites, Muzi.com and Creaders.com. The two portals each support a dozen or more BBSs. As can be seen from messages crossposted to China's BBSs, they are popular with readers in China as well.[7]

It is hard to know exactly what kind of people visit or post messages in the four forums. A long period of immersion in them seems to be the most ethical way of finding out. Users sometimes reveal bits of information

TABLE 5
Four Chinese-language bulletin boards

Forum name	URL	Owner	Nature of property	Year set up	Server location
Creaders	http//www.creaders.org/cgi-bin/mainpage.cgi	Creaders.Net	Commercial portal site	1997	Canada
Muzi	http://lundian.com/forum/normal/chinese/10001.html	Muzi.com	Commercial portal site	1998	USA
QGLT	http://bbs.peopledaily.com.cn/cgi-bbs/ChangeBrd?to = 14	*People's Daily*	Chinese government site	1999	China
Beida	http://bbs.beida-online.com/forum/list.php3?board = Beida_Forum	Beida-online.com	Commercial site with joint investment from Beijing University	2000	China

*For convenience, I refer to three of the forums by the names of their web sites. I use the Chinese initials QGLT for 'Strengthening the Nation Forum'.

about themselves in their interactions. If they have been involved in discussions for an extended period of time, they come to be known for their political positions. Stylistic and linguistic features may indicate whether the users are from Taiwan, Hong Kong or mainland China. It is clear from my experience that all four forums attract users from different parts of the world, although forums based in China have more users from Chinese locations while forums in North America have more users from North America. Judging from their familiarity with Chinese affairs and history, many of these North American users are likely to be of the Chinese diaspora.

Obstacles to democratic participation

All four BBSs have system operators, or sysops, to run their daily operations. Their duty is to implement forum policies. In general, all BBSs publish some posting policies. Those in China, however, are subject to more restrictive regulations, as can be observed in the censorship practices in QGLT.[8] While BBSs in China face more censorship, BBSs both inside and outside China face stylistic and rhetorical obstacles to achieving equal access, equal voice and reflective dialogue, the ideals of a democratic forum proposed by Kurland and Egan (1996). The possibility of anonymity in computer-mediated communication sometimes lowers the level of responsibility and accountability. Thus, when misunderstanding arises among users, unpleasant verbal exchanges may take place, sometimes leading to personal attacks.[9]

Despite censorship practices and stylistic indecencies, popular Chinese-language forums maintain a level of lively discussion. Users, particularly those in China, show a strong desire to become better informed and more critically engaged through the Internet. Remarks exalting the promise of the Internet like the following reflect this attitude:

> What we say here is unofficial. Hence bolder and less reserved. Conventional media in China are selective. . . . Our messages are often written in a hurry. They may not be fit for publication in style or structure. Only through this free Internet can we publish freely in an environment that may not be completely free. It is fast and exciting. If the posts are well-written, you get instant responses. No need for endless waiting. . . . As long as I can afford to go online, I will write endlessly. (QGLT, 13 Nov. 1999)

Furthermore, where there is censorship, there is protest. If sysops abuse their power by arbitrarily deleting a post, users may protest. Such protest often forces the sysops to explain and justify their censorship practices, thus creating pressure on sysops. Third, when filters are used for censorship, users have strategies to bypass them. For example, in May 2000, in the online protest surrounding the death of a Beijing University student, it quickly became clear that posts containing the characters for 'Beida' (Beijing University) would be blocked. Users beat the filters by inserting punctuation or other symbols between the two Chinese characters for 'Beida', posting messages with phrases like 'Bei.Da' or 'Bei2Da'. Finally, some BBSs may develop a community ethos, tacit group rules about the manner of expressing ideas. This ethos puts pressure on users who flame the forum or otherwise violate forum policies. It also limits hosts' power, because hosts too must follow this ethos if they wish to guarantee the proper functioning of the forums.

Volume of posts and level of discussion

The four forums vary in the volume of posts and level of interactivity. Generally speaking, a popular Chinese-language BBS has 50 to 100 posts daily. Three of the four forums fall within this range, while in QGLT, posts range from 1000 to 3000. Not all posts get responses. Those that do evolve into threads. Forums where posts get few responses resemble online broadcast stations, although they may broadcast on a wider range of subjects than regular radio stations in China. Forums with more discussions and interactivity show more civic engagement. I use the threads/headers ratio as a measure of the level of interactivity in the forums. Table 6 shows the volume of posts and level of interactivity for two randomly selected days.

As Table 6 shows, QGLT not only has the most posts (2321 for 11 June and 2798 for 12 June), but also the highest percentage of responses (60

TABLE 6
Volume of posts and level of interactivity in four Chinese-language BBS, 11–12 June 2001

	11 June				12 June			
	Headers	Threads	T/H*	Responses	Headers	Threads	T/H*	Responses
Creaders	53	26	49	124	77	45	58	366
Muzi	39	7	18	8	32	9	28	15
QGLT	834	498	60	1487	958	570	60	1840
Beida	58	12	21	24	102	14	14	30

*This is the percentage of headers that get responses. The total number of posts in a BBS is the number of headers plus the number of responses.

percent for both 11 and 12 June). While Creaders has fewer posts, its response rate is not much lower than that in QGLT, also indicating a high level of discussion. Muzi and Beida are not much competition, on both accounts. The Beida forum is the least active, probably due to its short history. Muzi maintains many other competing forums, which may have reduced the share of audience in its news forum.

Issues

Chinese-language BBSs cover a wide range of issues, so much so that they may be used as a weathervane for current affairs in or related to China. To look at the issues brought up in BBSs, I downloaded, counted and categorized all the posts in the four selected forums for one day. I decided to select a day of no special significance in the calendar of world events. A day of some significance, such as 13 July 2001, when China won its bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games, would mean a dramatic increase in the number of posts, which would make my task of counting the issues less manageable. Moreover, on such a day, posts tend to gravitate toward the major event of the day, thus narrowing the range of issues typical of a routine day. With these considerations in mind, I selected 12 June 2001, a day of no particular significance. Table 7 lists the issues discussed in the four forums on 12 June 2001.

Despite the diversity of discussion topics, it is easy to discern a few unifying themes. One is democracy. Here the debate revolves around denunciations of undemocratic practices and institutions in China and what kind of democracy China needs. Related to this are criticisms of government corruption and other social problems in China. A second theme is economic development, including issues about the development of the IT sector and China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). A third theme is international politics, particularly US–China relations, Japan–China relations, and the Taiwan issue. I use 'Culture' to cover topics

ranging from morality to religion. Posts such as greetings among fellow participants fall under the theme of 'Social'. The 'Social' category indicates the presence of a sense of community. Miscellaneous posts that do not fit into any of the above categories are covered under 'Other'.

The four forums differ in their critical treatment of the main themes. Compared with the standard news media in China, all four forums contain many more critical remarks about Chinese government policies and practices, and various social and political problems. Reflecting the different levels of control in the forums, forums based in North America are more critical than those based in China. Again probably reflecting the degree of censorship, several issues that are talked about in overseas forums are rarely discussed in forums based in China. These are the 1989 student

TABLE 7
Issues in the threads of four Chinese-language BBS, 12 June 2001

		Creaders	Muzi	QGST	Beida
Democracy and politics	Meaning of democracy	24		72	
	Online freedom of speech		2	65	2
	Corruption	3	1	19	
	Government politics and practices		1	26	
	Educational and social problems	3	2	36	4
	Subtotal	30	6	218	6
Development	Economy and development	1		69	
	Environment			12	
	Science			9	
	Subtotal	1		90	
International politics	USA	5		42	3
	Japan			15	
	Taiwan		1	23	
	Other			14	
	Subtotal	5	1	94	3
Culture	Moral culture	1		8	2
	Religion			9	
	Historical figures/events	1		6	
	Patriotism			12	
	Political culture	3		3	
	Other	1		7	
	Subtotal	6		45	2
Social				75	
Other		3	2	48	3
Total		45	9	570	14

movement and the Falun Gong movement. Each year, around 4 June (the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square movement), however, discussions on the student movement in overseas forums inevitably spill over into the forums in mainland China. There is evidence that the Chinese government tends to tighten its control of Internet forums on such politically sensitive occasions. Nevertheless, it is important to qualify the popular notion that Internet censorship in China has eliminated discussions about democracy. Even in an officially sponsored forum like QGLT, such discussions have been prevalent. Ironically, debates on democracy tend to be more intense the more censorship is exercised. In such debates, the issue of freedom of speech on the Internet is especially prominent.

The political functions of a transnational Chinese cultural sphere

The evidence presented so far shows that, despite obstacles to fully achieving the ideals of democratic participation in public sphere, these online spaces are open and diverse enough for participation. They generate a lively discourse on issues of interest to communities of cultural China. It is for this reason that these spaces may be considered as elements of a transnational public sphere, however imperfect. The lingering but important question is: what then are the political functions of this transnational Chinese cultural sphere? At the beginning of this article, I suggested that public sphere fulfils three political functions: public expression, civic association and popular protest. I will now discuss how the transnational Chinese cultural sphere fulfils these functions in the world arena and within civil society in China.

Transnational protest

At the global level, the Internet-based transnational Chinese cultural sphere has served as a communication network for several protest events. In 1996, for example, an online campaign was staged successfully to protest against NBC's coverage of Chinese athletes at the 1996 Olympic Games.[10] Also in 1996, an online protest movement was launched against Japanese ultra-nationalists' construction of a lighthouse on the Diaoyutai (Senkaku) Islands. In 1998, online protest was combined with offline demonstrations against ethnic violence in Indonesia. These movements show how an online transnational Chinese cultural sphere may influence politics in the world arena. In all three cases, the online Chinese cultural sphere served as a space of public expression and protest, and a nexus of information and

transnational mobilization. For this reason, I will not isolate the three functions in the following discussion, which focuses on the transnational protest against ethnic violence in Indonesia as an illustrative case.

From 12–15 May 1998, riots and violence broke out in Jakarta, Indonesia, with widespread looting and destruction of property owned by Chinese Indonesians, and, as revealed in the days following the riots, the mass rape of ethnic Chinese women. Such violence had happened before, most tragically in the ethnocide of 1965, but had received little attention among the world-wide ethnic Chinese population. This time around things were different. It started with a Mr Joe Tan in New Zealand, who 'felt ashamed for doing nothing and got a bit sick of the indifferent attitude of most people' (*The Straits Times*, 20 August 1998). Together with Tan Tse, a Chinese Canadian research engineer, Edward Liu, a San Francisco-based attorney, and W.W. Looi, an ethnic Chinese-Malaysian working for Oracle Corporation in California, he set up the World Huaren Federation (www.huaren.org), a web-site that directly invoked the idea of a cultural China to stage transnational protest against the ethnic violence in Indonesia (Arnold, 1998).

The protest began to escalate when William Wee, a Chinese-Filipino teaching computer science at the University of Cincinnati in Ohio, urged the Chinese students association there to organize a demonstration in Washington, DC (*China News Digest*, 1998). Wee's letter about plans for the demonstration, written in English, was posted on 17 July 1998 in the 'North America Freedom Forum', a popular Chinese-language forum known for its harsh criticisms of the Chinese government.[11] An ad hoc committee was set up to mobilize the demonstration at Washington, DC, while plans were under way, largely through communication on the Internet, to synchronize demonstrations in different parts of the world. What happened in the following weeks was truly amazing. On 7 August 1998, demonstrations protesting against the atrocities in Indonesia were held in Washington, DC, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Houston, New York and Toronto. On 8 August, demonstrations were held in Helsinki and Auckland, New Zealand. On 15 and 16 August, demonstrations were staged in Atlanta and Vancouver respectively. And on 22 August, Dallas had similar demonstrations. It was these events that triggered the following comments from Singapore's English-language newspaper *The Straits Times* (20 August 1998):

> A revolution of sorts took place on Aug 7. It didn't shake the world. It didn't topple any government. But it achieved more than these. It changed dramatically the way governments, societies and communities conducted themselves by tearing down national boundaries and making their deeds transparent to the entire world.

Impact on civil society in China

Since the student movement in 1989, studies of civil society in China have proliferated. Although there is some agreement that a nascent civil society emerged in China's reform era, there is also a cautious note about its merely 'incipient' character. Scholars have warned that China's public sphere remains weak. Articulation of social issues and sharing of information are limited by the lack of institutionalized means of communication and public forums (Calhoun, 1989). Social organizations lack sufficient autonomy from the state to function as a routinized social base against state power on behalf of citizens (Frolic, 1997). And organized protest is under strict state control and does not have a legitimate existence.[12]

Despite Internet control in China, there is strong evidence that the emerging online Chinese sphere has had an impact in all these three areas.[13] For example, a recent survey of the conditions of the Internet in China shows that, compared with non-Internet users, China's Internet users are more socially engaged – they have more spaces for expressing personal views and exchanging views with others (Guo and Bu, 2001).[14] The online sphere also affects civic organizations in China. China's NGOs, a recent phenomenon, rely heavily on the Internet to advance their causes. Apart from NGOs, a growing number of environmental groups have appeared in the online sphere, with the Internet serving as a public nexus of information for environmental activists across the country.[15] Their web-sites often have links to international NGOs.

While existing civic organizations make extensive use of the Internet, a new kind of civic organization, that of online communities, has emerged in China. One such community consists of members of China's 'educated youth' generation.[16] It has formed around the BBS forum called 'Forum of Chinese Educated Youth' (*Huaxia zhiqing luntan*, or HXZQ).[17] This community also has a chatroom and a well-designed, content-rich homepage. Besides information and documents about the 'educated youth' generation and the political movement that gave this generation its historical identity, the homepage hosts an address book of 180 former educated youth (as of 7 March 2001), as well as links to dozens of homepages or BBSs maintained by individuals or groups of former educated youth. Several of these homepages are based in the US, most in China. Thus, this online forum serves as a virtual clearing-house for an entire network of the educated youth generation in and outside of China.

Finally, the online Chinese cultural sphere is also changing the dynamics of popular protest in China.[18] Although resistance and protest are common in China, the mobilization of organized protest is relatively infrequent because of state regulations against social movement organizations. One advantage of the Internet is that it provides a space for speedy mobilization while reducing the chances of personal danger. An emblematic case was

the influential protest activities surrounding the murder of a Beijing University student in late May 2000. When the university authorities attempted to cover up the case in order to avoid possible unrest during the eleventh anniversary of the 1989 student movement, the news was leaked in the university's BBS forums. For a week from 23 May to 31 May, protest raged in the BBS forums across China, as these forums became spaces for discussing strategies and demands, making announcements about campus sit-ins, and live broadcast of campus protest activities. Of particular interest were the connections between BBSs both in and outside China. Posts that appeared in China's BBSs were cross-posted to some Chinese-language forums in the United States. Some messages that appeared in BBSs in China were clearly posted by users residing in the US. These users tended to identify themselves as Beijing University alumni. The author of one message, posted on 29 May 2000 in Netease's 'Current Affairs and News' forum, explained why it was important to fight to have better campus security, arguing that fighting for one's own interests, something common in the USA, was a sign of social progress. Another message was posted the same day in the 'Strengthening the Nation Forum' by someone called 'Wanderer'. Self-identified as a Chinese student in an American university, 'Wanderer' commended the security measures in American campuses and suggested that Chinese universities might learn from the American example.[19]

Discussion and conclusion

Evidence presented in this article shows that Chinese cultural spaces are flourishing on the Internet. These spaces are based both inside and outside China, yet technologically, and to a considerable extent socially, they are linked to global networks. These spaces are globally accessible, discourse in them flows globally, and publics are linked across national boundaries. The dynamics in these online spaces both reflects and reflects upon offline conflicts and struggles. The issues brought into these spaces are critical social issues. Consequently, these online spaces may fulfil significant political functions at both national and international levels. In the global context, they have facilitated world-wide mobilization of protest. In China, they have impinged on civil society development. For these reasons, these online spaces may be considered as a transnational Chinese cultural sphere.

So far, I have mapped the spaces, dynamics and political influences of this cultural sphere without discussing the conditions of its emergence. I would like to take up this theme briefly, focusing on three conditions that coincide with the three title words of this journal.

Media

The bourgeois public sphere of 18th-century Europe was the product of modern capitalism and the institution of the nation-state. It depended on the rise of print media and a commercial press, the emergence of bourgeois people as the carrier of the public, and the growth of state power that functioned to guarantee economic development. In subsequent developments, the economic and political systems that gave birth to the bourgeois public sphere re-feudalized it, to the effect that a culture-debating public had devolved into a culture-consuming public by the middle of the 20th century (Habermas, 1989). This was so in the European societies which Habermas examined, but no less so in other societies, like China.

As a new infrastructure of public spaces, the Internet promises to restore some of the critical functions of the public sphere. It does so through the unique combination of communication media and public space, for the Internet is both a medium and a space. It is global in both these properties. Like the bourgeois public sphere, Internet technology itself was the product of modern capitalism and nation-state. And like that historical public sphere, it seems to encroach upon the power of both, this time by loosening territorial and human barriers. Whether a re-feudalization of online spaces will occur depends on the result of future struggles, including the struggles to resist the commercialization of the Internet (Lessig, 1999) and to maintain a high level of engagement in public debate, civic association and protest on the Internet.

Culture

The rise of the online transnational Chinese cultural sphere depends on the Internet. Yet the Internet is not the only condition. The Internet spaces would be a barren land without their inhabitants. Once we start thinking about spaces in terms of their inhabitants, a host of other factors compel our attention. We need to ask what kinds of people inhabit what kinds of spaces and, above all, why some groups of people come to inhabit similar or identical spaces. This is an impossible task to accomplish here, but is worth exploring. For analytical purposes, we might consider the act of visiting or using the same online space such as an online magazine or a bulletin board as a spontaneous form of collective action. What are the conditions of this action besides the fact that Internet spaces tend to be globally accessible? There is clearly no organization, so a resource mobilization approach to this collective action problem will be inapt. We have to fall back on a cultural model.

Among the many scholars who have examined culture as a source of action, Ann Swidler offers a powerful approach. She starts with a critique

of Weberian cultural theory and argues that culture influences action 'not by providing the ends people seek, but by giving them the vocabulary of meanings, the expressive symbols, and the emotional repertoire with which they can seek anything at all' (1995: 27; see also 1986). Following Swidler's insights, we could argue that an important reason why the emerging online Chinese cultural sphere could draw participants (or readers in the case of online magazines) is that they share some common cultural repertoire. It may be a repertoire of some shared history, but certainly of expressive symbols. This repertoire, however, is simply that. Cultural traditions have been built into it, but they do not guide action by providing common goals. The goals of the Chinese diaspora in North America are not the same as the goals of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. And yet, at times of crisis, these two groups can reach out to each other online and offline. It is the cultural repertoire that they share to lesser or greater degrees that makes this possible.

Society

In Habermas's scheme, society refers to the life-world of private persons. A key function of the public sphere is to channel private concerns into the public arena, while resisting the encroachment of political power into the private realm. Other scholars have emphasized the centrality of the public sphere to identity formation, noting that participation in public life is a prerequisite for developing a self-definition of who one is (Benhabib, 1992: 104).

It is impossible to address the fundamental question of what the transnational Chinese cultural sphere does to identity formation among its participants. Throughout this article, I have sidestepped this question and concentrated instead on its broader socio-political impact. I would like to pose this question in these concluding lines, using a statement by Tu Wei-ming as a starting hypothesis. Writing on Chinese civilization as the roots for a Chinese cultural discourse, Tu suggests that 'By emphasizing cultural roots, Chinese intellectuals in Taiwan, Hong Kong and North America hoped to build a transnational network to explore the meaning of being Chinese in a global context' (1994: 25). It could be argued that the discourse produced in the Internet spaces studied in this article, whether it is about democracy in China or violence against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, goes some way toward exploring the meaning of being Chinese in the global context. Yet in all cases I examined, this theme remains implicit and opaque. Is it because of the very confusion about the meaning of being Chinese in this age of globalization that an online Chinese cultural sphere is coming into being, as a realm for self-clarification as much as for political action? This is a mighty thesis for future pursuit.

Notes

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1. Another common term is 'transnational China'. In Mayfair Yang's scheme, transnational China refers to mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Chinese communities in other parts of the world. It is not entirely different from Tu Wei-ming's conception of cultural China. See Yang (1999).

2. According to the *Overseas Chinese Economy Yearbook* (1999), the population of ethnic Chinese outside Taiwan and mainland China was 34.87 million in 1999. Taiwan had a population of 22 million in 1999. China has 1.2 billion, of which about 33.7 million were connected to the Internet as of December 2001 (CNNIC, 2002).

3. Home audience is defined as people accessing the Internet from home who visited a particular domain or property during the reported period. See http://www.iamasia.com/presscentre/pressrel/pressrel_news.cfm?content_id = 395. Retrieved 4 August 2001.

4. http://www.wenxue.com/mediakit.htm. Retrieved 4 August 2001.

5. It was probably for this reason that the best known of these online magazines, *The World of Ideas* (*Sixiang de Jingjie*), was closed down in early 2001 by its owner Li Yonggang, a university professor. Li's own explanation was that he could no longer tackle the enormous amount of work needed to run the web-site.

6. For listings of BBSs in Taiwan, see http://tw.dir.yahoo.com/Internet/BBS/.

7. Access from China may not be always available or directly available. For example, in early June 2001, concerns were expressed in some China-based BBSs that Muzi.com was blocked and users in China could not access it. When not directly available, users may resort to proxy servers to overcome this problem.

8. From 1996 to early 2001, the Chinese government promulgated 12 Internet regulations. Regulations specifically targeting BBSs were promulgated in November 2000. They stipulated that all BBS users are responsible for the information they release, that users cannot release information harmful to national interests, and that BBS services should follow a licensing procedure. For a list of Internet regulations in China, see CNNIC's official webiste, http://www.cnnic.net.cn. For Internet content regulation in China, see Harwit and Clark (2001).

9. For an excellent study of the rhetorical features in computer-mediated communication, see Gurak (1997).

10. For a debate on this protest event, see Lu (1999) and Friedman (1999).

11. I retrieved the message containing Wee's letter from http://www.nacb.com/bbs/pub/yourvoice/messages/3.html on 13 July 2001.

12. Protest and resistance are happening at a higher frequency in contemporary China, but these are likely to be 'episodes and pockets of resistance' instead of organized and sustained challenges. See Lee (2000: 58) and Li and O'Brien (1996).

13. On the hopes of the democratizing potential of the Internet in China, and its pitfalls, see Drake et al. (2000), Qiu (1999/2000), Hartford (2000), Hachigian (2001), and Harwit and Clark (2001). Opinions are sharply divided on these issues, and there is a shortage of systematic empirical research.

14. In respect of media expressing personal views, 14.2 percent of non-users selected TV, 21.9 percent selected newspapers and 10.9 percent selected magazines. Added together, the percentage of non-Internet users relying on these three dominant conventional media for expressing views is 46 percent. This pales in comparison with 62.8 percent of Internet users who chose the Internet as a medium for expressing views. The same pattern holds when it comes to exchanging views with others. Of non-users, 13.9 percent selected TV as a medium for exchanging views with others, 14.2 percent selected newspapers, and 6.8 percent selected magazines. These numbers are insignificant compared with the 73.4 percent of Internet users who find the Internet to be a medium for exchanging views with others (Guo and Bu, 2001).

15. By environmental groups, I refer to voluntary associations of individuals interested in environmental issues. They may be student clubs or individuals linked together by the Internet. Environmental NGOs are non-governmental, non-profit, but officially registered associations. Two environmental NGOs are Friends of Nature (www.fon.org.cn), established in 1994 and Global Village of Beijing (www.gvbchina.org), established in 1996. Environmental groups include: Gong Shan Zoology Protection Association (green-gong.com), Greenriver (go2.163.com/manl), Green Camp of University Students in China (www.gbj.grchina.net/greencamp), Greener Beijing (gbj.grchina.net/greenerbj.htm), Oasis Club (www.cau.edu.cn/luzhou/int.htm), Tibetan Antelope Information Center (ww.taic.org), and Wetlands of Beijing (www.wowcn.org).

16. Also known as the Red Guard generation or the Cultural Revolution Generation, China's 'educated youth' generation refers broadly to the cohort that was sent to the countryside during the 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside' Movement (1968–78). There is a growing literature on various aspects of this generation. See Yang (2000) and Jiang and Ashley (2000).

17. See http://www.zqsc.org/huaxia/wwwboard/index.html.

18. There is a rapidly growing literature on Internet activism. See Ayres (1999), Danitz and Strovel (1999) and Hill and Hughes (1998).

19. This discussion of the online protest is based on data I collected online during the protest period. A popular BBS run by Beijing University alumni has archived a collection of essays on the murdered student. See http://bbs.mit.edu/digest/digest14/digest14.html. As of July 2001, a key word search of the student's name Qiu Qingfeng in cn.yahoo.com may still retrieve more than a thousand items on Qiu's death. Also, the well-known online memorial cn.netor.com has a web-site dedicated to Qiu, including her photo and more than 100 essays posted in the website's BBS forum.

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