ONE CITY, TWO SYSTEMS: DEMOCRACY IN AN ELECTRONIC CHAT ROOM IN HONG KONG

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Abstract

China resumed the sovereignty of Hong Kong from Britain in 1997. To preserve this former colony as an international finance centre, China is abided to rule Hong Kong under the principle of "One Country Two Systems", which guarantees that the capitalism of Hong Kong remains intact within its territorial boundary, across which China's communism is the dominant ideology. However, local citizens started to question the authorities' determination to preserve the principle soon after 1997, when self-censorship in traditional media was notorious, and they conceived that the continuity of press freedom and other democratic practice were being eroded. Under this critical period of public anxiety, the proliferation of online media gives the residents a ray of hope. The public seems to believe that these new communication media create a free and autonomous space and an emerging online community relatively immune to official controls. This paper aims, through a case study of an electronic chat room of an online newspaper, to examine whether it is possible for local citizens to engage in a democratic form of online communication.

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Political Transition and Media Freedom[1]

Hong Kong, a former British colony, became part of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on June 30, 1997, under the principle of "One Country Two Systems" and enactment of what is called the Basic Law.[2] Despite China's promise to uphold "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong" under this law, the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong (SARHK) is not allowed to elect its own ruling party or exercise direct voting rights to elect its Chief Executive, the equivalent of a prime minister elsewhere. In economic terms, Hong Kong is one of the world's main financial city-states and is characterised by free trade, an open market and a *laissez-faire* non-interventionist policy. In political terms, however, Hong Kong is under the sovereignty of the central government of the People's Republic of China; it is a decolonised city without independence (Lau 1987).

Although the citizens of Hong Kong experience much economic freedom, the political system is relatively closed. The operation of corporate media is particularly problematic because media are not only private enterprises, but also producers of a cultural product – news – that results from the interplay of economic and political constraints such as pressure from different parties, sanctions from the People's Republic of China and the general dominant ideology (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Thus, although local media enjoy autonomy to operate privately, commercially and independently, they exercise self-censorship under the subtle political pressure of the Chinese authority (Fung and Lee forthcoming). Empirical studies have suggested that both the public and journalists are seriously concerned about the possible reduction of the public sphere and equally worried about China's potential intrusion upon freedom of speech (Lee, Chan and Lee 1996).

One City, Two Systems: Hope for Technological Freedom

The proliferation of online media gives Hong Kong residents a ray of hope. Since the late 1990s, nine local major newspapers in the city have established online versions of their products.[3] These new communication media, with their discussion lists and electronic chat rooms, have created a free and autonomous space that is separate from the highly-monitored media system and allows citizens a further opportunity to engage in politics.

Western experience, which is generally sceptical of such optimism, does not seem to stimulate similar criticism in this Chinese city. Rather, the official discourse, which advocates the pragmatic uses of communication and online technology for Hong Kong to become a gateway for China trade, an Asian information hub and regional headquarters for international business, has overwhelmed discussion on its control and access.[4] In contrast to this dominant position, Gauntlett (2000), when exploring issues of democracy and its manifestation on the Internet, points to the danger in the state stretching its normative arm to discursive online space by means of limiting access to the Internet and thereby restricting its viability. Despite concerns and the perhaps *de facto* existence of ideological domination or forms of hegemony in traditional media, liberals and scholars seem inclined to optimistically see the emerging online community as being relatively immune to such controls.

The protection comes from an unconscious construction of a "one city, two systems" ideal – an analogy of the "One Country Two systems" used when the principle fails to function smoothly.[5] This leads to the frequently made argument that

the authorities would abide by the principle and refrain from interfering with the online operation and process in the "other" social system.

On practical grounds, inasmuch as the online discussion sites (including online newspaper forum, other online chat rooms and newsgroups) are not central to the public sphere, these sites appear to be less influential in determining public opinion than are the mass media. Both optimists and sceptics agree that authorities are probably reluctant to allocate extra resources to tame dissident opinions in such online spaces. For the authorities, it appears important to preserve certain remote democratic sites so as to "diffuse" the residual and oppositional ideologies, and co-opt them into the mainstream seems to be a more effective method of control (Williams, 1980). This idea was captured in Habermas's conceptualisation (1962) of the tension between a true public sphere and the state. The constitutional state, which has already stripped citizens of civil rights, often pretends to be a "neutral" organisation of public power ensuring its subordination to the needs of a private and democratic sphere with regard to power and domination. The existence of such a civic sphere vis-à-vis the state can serve as a token of the state's endurance or openness to opposition.

In the Hong Kong context, while publishers and editors of print media hesitate to give a green light to dissident speeches and political struggles against the governance in their newspaper headlines, the electronic and virtual newspapers seem to operate more "freely," or at least with fewer institutional controls.[6] Online chat rooms of these newspapers and other sites can thus serve as forums for the public to express its opinions, to organise actions, and to accommodate democratic engagement. Whereas the principle of One Country Two Systems might not be actualised in real politics, the online chat room, if constructed and appropriated in a democratic way, can possibly epitomise this principle and exemplify an ideal of "one city, two systems."

Between Practice and Theory

However, in the light of the looming presence of China in Hong Kong, various online social practices and other real social actions may not directly relate to the ideal goals of such practices and actions. The expectation of a free technological space for political deliberation confronts two theoretical questions. First, there is the question of the political function of these online sites. Delinked not only organisationally from governance, but also from any communication channel with the authorities, the discursive formation in these sites can simply be reduced to a kind of repeated ritual without producing any manifest, immediate political functions, consequences and movement. Such forms of democracy are only equivalent to quasi forms of the public sphere, which may or may not exemplify basic elements of democracy.

Many recent studies of cyberspace in fact shift focus from evaluating political outcomes to examining the potentiality of deliberative formation in this arena. Whereas there is increasing documentation of practices and potentiality of the formation of community (e.g., Baym 1998; Rheingold 1993) and cyber democracy in online space in the West (e.g. Tsagarousianou, Tambini and Bryan 1998; Alexander and Pal 2000), empirically-based Chinese studies suggest that neither the online deliberative community nor political effect is being achieved. For example, Fung

and Kedl (2000) argue that in a China-remote and American-located electronic discussion group, soc.culture.china, the overseas Chinese participants are too concerned with their own representative publics and vested interests, thereby hindering the process of deliberation. This study describes how, during the period when the People's Republic of China threatened Taiwan independence with a missile attack along the Taiwan Strait, chat group members from Taiwan and the People's Republic of China degraded their discussion to flaming and personal attacks, and thus reduced the possibility of rational dialogue and consensus.

Second, intrinsically deprived of political consequences, the meaning of political participation in these sites has to be re-considered. In Western countries, theories of democracy assume citizen participation and almost perfect circulation, dissemination, and availability of information and provision of sufficient social spaces and channels for citizens to take part. These spaces can contribute to the formation of a civil society. That is, the public sphere acts as a medium within which citizens discuss current affairs for deliberation, and accordingly, there can be empowerment of citizens to enable them to rationally participate in the wider public sphere.

Under an authoritarian regime, however, it is questionable to what extent political participation can liberate a civil society from domination.[7] The online media examined in the case of Hong Kong were characterised by the very "remoteness" of the online sphere in terms of political influence from real politics, and this contradicts the underlying assumption and definition of a civic participation that crystallises the tension between the civil society and the state (Keane 1992). There is much reason to doubt the value of such participation.

If the value of the online sphere in a politically-closed regime is to be achieved, some sort of democratic values must be re-discovered and be shown to serve as an avenue for long term and subtle social transformation of values at the individual level if not contributing to direct political influence on the policy and authorities. The concept of "participatory democracy," as David Held (1987: 279) suggests in *Models of Democracy* may be useful inasmuch as it serves to explain a condition under which citizens may be in a position to have *effective opportunities* (but not effective outcomes) for participation. It may be a condition that exists without guaranteeing an immediate political effect and is therefore an alternative form of civil society as such. This public sphere can be constructed in a way that enables divergent interests to be fully represented, and that can achieve a form that is relatively autonomous from both government and the market (Curran 1991, 52).

In this study the focus is *not* about whether electronic chat rooms lead to real political outcomes or the formation of civil society at large. Rather, this paper aims, through a case study in Hong Kong, to explicate whether it is possible for the local citizens to engage in a democratic form of communication with the aid of the Internet that may or may not be in disjunction from real-life politics. In the wake of a closed political environment, the search for minimally free political practices in these spaces may have serious implications for the dominated public to engage in democratic struggle. The significance of this study lies in theorising about such a form of democracy and, practically, it sheds light on the potentiality and possibility of political struggle in a region under political domination by an authoritarian state as in the case of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong: Online Marketplace in Peril

A virtual form of democracy is examined empirically through a case study of an online newspaper chat room. In the newspaper market, media conglomerations, which have instituted electronic chat rooms, include the English newspaper *South China Morning Post*, the USA-style popular press *Apple Daily News*, the centre-of-the-road independent press *Sing Tao Daily News* and the *Ming Pao Daily News*.

These influential Hong Kong chat rooms are quite unique. In general, electronic chat rooms might be commonly conceived as political "nomadic settlements" in a vast uncontrollable environment where dissidents can deliver ideas without consequences from the authorities. In the case of Hong Kong, there are also numerous electronic chat rooms, discussion groups and virtual communities in this economically *laissez-faire* international capitalist city. However, precisely because of the large numbers, their hit rate is limited, their influence minimal, and they are unable to attract a large group of loyal users. The chat rooms studied are different in that they have secured a much larger audience than the non-media affiliated chat rooms and have done so partly because the existing newspaper readership has already formed a large base which has the potential to transfer directly into the virtual space. The Web pages or online versions of these media have provided the dual extra functions of conveying news information and of amplifying opinions, and in doing so they can become highly political (and possibly more vulnerable).

Before the political transition, the News Corporation of Rupert Murdoch was sold to a Malaysian Chinese Robert Kuok who had enormous investments in Burma, Malaysia, and China, and owned Hong Kong's most influential English newspaper *South China Morning Post*. The *Post* launched its chat room with much public attention in 1997, but it folded soon after. In a personal interview with Nury Vittachi and during two public talks in March and May 2001, this liberal, and a former editor responsible for starting the chat-room in the *Morning Post*'s homepage said that he was asked to maintain a hands-off policy regarding the chat room because the newspaper thought that the messages were too uncontrolled in criticising China and hence contradicting the interest of the owner (see also Vittachi 2001).[8]

The online versions of the Chinese papers faced budget cuts and restructuring in 2001 after the dot com era had come to an end. *Apple'*s online version under the Next Group led the way in this trend. Although it remained second in terms of circulation, the appeal of its chat room declined since the downsizing of its operation. Its online operation used to be the largest in Hong Kong in terms of staff size and employment of senior journalists. Journalists also believed that it used to be the most popular online newspaper website in Hong Kong. It faced an estimated loss of HK$20 million early in 2001 (HK$7.8 = US$1). Its owner Jimmy Lai then decided to cut cost and laid off almost the entire online editorial team. Now the online version basically reproduces the content of the print version of the newspaper and maintains a minimal operation. The newspaper's online chat room still survives but is subsumed under the Next Group's portal, which primarily sells its mass taste newspaper, entertainment, leisure and horse racing information with the Group's other popular magazines.

Despite the downsizing of the websites of the newspapers *Ming Pao* and *Sing Tao,* the sites survived and became the two largest online newspapers with chat rooms. Tiong Hiew Hing, a Malaysian-Chinese, who has significant investments

in Singapore and Malaysia and close ties with China, acquired a majority stake in *Ming Pao* in 1995. During the political transition, the political self-censorship as well as newspaper take-overs provoked public criticism and worries about press freedom in Hong Kong. Mingpao.com now mixes news information with horse racing tips, tourist agency services, and also has an online book shopping service to broaden its audience base. The Sing Tao Group, a news syndicate based in Hong Kong, was acquired by a commercial corporation Global China Technology Group Limited in 2001. The group has owned the *Sing Tao Daily News* for over 60 years and this paper was consistently ranked 5-6th in terms of circulation among all the Hong Kong dailies in the 1980s and the 1990s. The singtao.com, with more than 100,000 hits daily, is now managed by an information centre of the syndicate which provides up-to-the-minute local news, five overseas versions of the newspaper, information on the stock market, property market, educational resources, lifestyle and entertainment, advertisements and an interactive chat room on current affairs. In general, this online site is regarded among journalists as one of the most established local-oriented websites in Hong Kong.

Online Newspaper Chat Rooms

This study is an examination of politically sensitive chat room discussions on topics found on singtao.com Hong Kong.[9] In order to understand the selection and gate-keeping process of the organisation, messages placed in the chat room were analysed and the editor-in-charge (who also commanded the reporting operation of the online news) was interviewed. The editor-in-charge announces around 18-20 agendas for daily discussion and the amount of individual participation in each agenda ranges from 5 to 60 messages. The agendas centre on topics such as local political issues, local housing, issues on government and welfare, Sino-American relations and Sino-Hong Kong relations, with the latter luring more controversial debates online. Some discussion agendas last for several months and in general, the amount of participants determines how long the agenda remains on the site.

In this study, the specific topic analysed was exceptionally popular during the period of study from October 28, 2000, to January 30, 2001. During that period there were 142 individual chat room postings with over a hundred participants (with 27 participants posting contributions more than once) in the chat room.[10] The author also analysed the news articles for a three-day period and four editorials placed in the newspaper during the same period in order to compare the position of the newspaper with the participants online. The analysis of the postings, news articles, and editorials, as well as interviews with the editor-in-charge and other journalists[11] allowed for comparison of data. Such a procedure is sometimes called triangulation and may help reduce apparent complexities, perplexities and anomalies found in the field (Mann and Stewart 2000: 197).[12] The inquiry of the political stance of the editor and of the Sing Tao Group also helped to empirically determine whether and how some participant subjects are differentially empowered or segmented and, in particular, how some participants are involuntarily put in a position subordinate to others (Fraser 1993).

It appears that the chat room under study, singtao.com, as suggested by the participants and the informants, is the most the liberal among Hong Kong news-

papers. Some participants said that they could not publish their ideas on other online newspaper chat rooms whereas singtao.com opened the door for them. The following passage from a participant found on singtao.com illustrates its wide accessibility and tolerance:

> *When [Hong Kong] journalists abuse their power, who is going to stop them? I've sent in a number of postings to XX News Forum (name of another Hong Kong newspaper) only to see them disappear a few hours later. My posting[s] were all issue-related, abided by their rules. Why are they so afraid to let others hear a different voice? I have friends who became an object of their focus at one time. They prosecuted him with fabricated stories & made him prove to them that he was right. In a democratic society, I thought people are innocent until proven guilty. Enough is enough!* (October 29, 2000).[13]

As illustrated by this chat room message, members of the chat room might feel disappointed by censorship of oppositional or critical opinions in other important sites while singtao.com is relatively open to a diversity of viewpoints. With open access guaranteed, any non-democratic element thereafter revealed in the chat room discussion of singtao.com could not be attributed to the accessibility of opinions, as managed by the person-in-charge of the chat room. Rather, the perpetuation and construction of the forms of democracy, arguably, hinges upon the interaction and manipulation of the representative publics, that is, the participants representative of the local and the national in the chat room.

Struggle Between National and Local

The specific issue (or volume) of the chat room on singtao.com under study was one about the criticism of a political leader in China on the Hong Kong journalists. The series of event happened in October 2000 when the party leader of People's Republic of China, Jiang Zimen, publicly criticised Hong Kong reporters as being "naive and simple." The issue provoked a public outcry about the authorities' intrusion into press freedom and democracy in Hong Kong – the two most sensitive issues in postcolonial Hong Kong – whereas the Chinese officials regarded it as a remark about the local journalists who they felt failed to fulfil their social responsibilities. At a political level, the official's criticism and the support of the members in the chat room reflected a pro-China nationalist attitude while the defenders of the Hong Kong journalists represented a local liberal view, thereafter referred to as the pro-local members. During the period of study, the messages published online can also be regarded, ideologically, as a struggle between the national and the local, a political contest that has relocated from the real political reality to this virtual space. Through examining the discourse and dialogue of the chat room, this paper gauges to what extent there are opportunities for democratic discursive formation in this online chat room.

Print Media Coverage and Editorials

The analysis revealed that news articles and editorials reflected the limits of the press to report such a critical national-local issue. Imbued with Western journalistic professionalism acquired from American journalistic education, media in Hong Kong attempt to maintain objective, fair and non-opinionated coverage. This practice gave the media the advantage of steering clear of political pressure in featur-

ing opinions critical of the Chinese central government (Fung and Lee forthcoming).

The coverage during the period was factual and non-biased. No matter how hostile the Chinese leader was to the Hong Kong journalists, the *Sing Tao Daily News* only repeated what Jiang said to the media in public without taking sides.[14] As the issue developed, the newspaper attention was on Jiang Zimen's "explanation of the 'theory of media,' and the role of Hong Kong under the "One Country Two Systems" principle.[15]

> *[I] emphasize that press freedom and social responsibility should supplement each other. It doesn't mean that when you are socially responsible, you don't have press freedom. You can't also act unscrupulously without responsibility for the sake of press freedom* (October, 21, 2001, translated from Chinese news reports).

> *The central government does not intervene the autonomy of the special administrative region. But the Special Administrative Region [and Hong Kong is one of the two] should defend the nation's legitimacy and national interest. [I] don't allow a group of minorities in the SAR to perform activities which attack the central government and split the nation* (October 22, 2001, translated from Chinese reporting).

The editorial suggests that the media allow journalists to express their viewpoints. But the newspaper was very cautious about expressing its own opinion and approached the issue from the defence of journalistic professionalism rather than from the point of view of creating and admitting a general public mood, which seems to be against the conservatism of the Chinese leader. It appears that, with this controversy, the media were bold enough to mildly stand against the governmental and national viewpoint. Given the potential for substantial political pressure within an authoritative nation, this mildly critical stand evaded political censure. This was a situation that was almost certainly tolerated because of a collapse of consensus among mainland authorities (Hallin 1987) and was pursued by the newspapers because the event was so critical that the press could not afford to ignore vested public interest in full view of local consumers (Fung and Lee forthcoming; Lee 1998).

During the period, the *Sing Tao Daily News* ran four editorials with positions which generally sympathised with the Hong Kong journalists against Jiang's "improper" criticism. The editorial suggested that "What we asked was the same as (the American 60 minutes plus journalists) Wallace asked," but that the leader of the country was responsive to Western media, and harsh on the local journalists. It also indicated:

> *Hong Kong journalists were very dissatisfied that Jiang believed that what Wallace asked was more sophisticated than Hong Kong journalists. Jiang gave a bad impression* (October 28, 2000, translated from an editorial written in Chinese).

Jiang was not criticised either for his intrusion into or indifference toward local interests. Comments centred around his flattering of the US foreign regime and his failure to acknowledge the competence of local journalists – legitimate and safe remarks designed to maintain a good local-national relationship. Criticism was also directed at an institutional level rather than at the Chinese leader himself.

In summary, media coverage as well as editorials provided very limited room for professional journalists to voice their concern and disappointment about this media-related event. At the same time, the newspapers hesitated to exercise their full rights to criticise the Chinese authorities. With the existence of a relatively controlled traditional medium the danger is present that readers might switch to the virtual and remote form of media to search for a liberated space.

"Professionalism" of Online Membership

This online media documented debates and arguments given by two groups of people. There is the general public who are concerned with social issues and a group of "professional writers" who are predisposed with a specific viewpoint to either defend or attack various target groups. The former, who leisurely participate in cybertalks as fulfilment of their citizenry can be called amateur participant citizens, or if defined by their political stance, amateur participant dissidents. They are not necessarily members of minorities or real political dissidents. In general, they roughly represent the local public who realise that the existing mass media are not able to channel radical and politically incorrect ideologies, and they take advantage of the availability of an alternative. Their messages are neither organised nor coherent.

The latter group, "professional writers" (also described as "professional fighters" by the editor), were seen to advocate the official view, fight against members opposed to the presence of China in Hong Kong, and perform some political purposes rather than simply acting as concerned citizenry. According to the editor, there might be more than one source of professionals, but their goals were overlapping. To trace the extent to which the site was "occupied" by these writers, the editor examined the chat room login information and found that although many of the participants in the chat room used different pseudonyms they in fact originated from just a very few sources. This suggested that the same group of professionals participated in this remote form of democracy but did so strategically by, for example, creating a pseudo majority trend on the site, and by organising group attacks on dissidents and or by mounting a defence of the official point of view.

The participation of these professionals is obscure and their organised actions and goals are unknown. At times some pretended to be English writers and used an uncommon English name (or pseudonym) to convey their ideas. However, as the editor suggested, it was a bit "too amazing" that these "English" persons would be so familiar with local knowledge and community issues – knowledge that was often more substantial than that demonstrated by the locals.

Other professional writers were distinguished by their use of simplified Chinese characters, the official written Chinese language used in the People's Republic of China but not in Hong Kong and other overseas Chinese communities, and other phrases and wordings commonly used in censuring imperialism by the communist regime, for example, "the victims of Western colonisation and opium," "being the colonised slaves" and "anti-Chinese fighters" which are all phrases uncommon to Hong Kong residents.

In general, the electronic chat room discussion could be identified as messages from both amateur citizens and professional writers who represent the local view and the national perspective respectively. This is surprising. Hong Kong publics

might reasonably expect that the power of the authorities would be absent from this somewhat remote form of democracy and thus count on them as a safe place in which to engage in "underground" politics, but this turns out not to be the case. While the battlefield over other public spheres seems contained, the official propaganda frontline may be increasingly moving into this remote space.

Organised and Active Manipulation

Political discussions are first presented by the editor-in-charge, as in the following question: "what is your view on the event in which Jiang Zimen criticised the Hong Kong journalists naïve?" This question was followed by a warning statement declaring that "You are all welcome to raise your opinion through this interactive forum. But please observe the rules of freedom of speech, and don't deliberately voice opinions attacking others, criticise someone by name or some organisations irrelevant to the situation, or make libellous and slanderous statements" (October 28, 2000).

Ostensibly, the professional writers identify themselves with pro-China Chinese participants and stood aloof from local views. They immediately created the opposition between "them" and the "other" locals (represented by the word "YOU"). One pro-China participant said:

> *Hong Kong is a part of China & rule by China. Chairman Jiang has the right and obligation to support the Chief Officer in Hong Kong. In China, you do not have the right of poll. So, this is SIMPLE and easy, no trick and no hard feel, YOU SHOULD understand the real situation logically. The Chief Officer in Hong Kong should be selected, appointed and supported by China, not the people in Hong Kong. This is for protecting China's interest in Hong Kong. No NAIVE understanding what is 2 systems in one country. You need to break this funny shell and eat up the bitter inside. Hong Kong is communist now. Reporters' question is simple and nad've* (October 29, 2000).

For the sake of argument and as an opposition to the local, it was suggested that the principle of "one country two systems" as applied to Hong Kong should be understood differently. This online unofficial view seems to be more real than the official view which would not dare explain the "One Country, Two Systems" principle in a way unfavourable to the local, or at least could not do so without provoking international criticisms. Clearly, participating in this online discussion, the professional writers aimed at disparaging the dissident so as to create an atmosphere that the local and liberal view is that of the majority. They tried to shrink the dissidents down to a cabal of radicals who challenged their leader in the name of society at large. Another professional writer said,

> *They [the local people] thought once they have freedom, freedom could become as common as bread and butter. [They] become victims of Western colonization and opium, and voluntary act as Western anti-Chinese fighters, and making Hong Kong chaotic and poisoning the relationship between Hong Kong and the central government become the highest enjoyment…. Don't think that some Western countries or people expressed "concern," and they can be proud of it. Who gave them rice to eat, and who gave them air to breathe. Can we punish them by letting freedom feed them for several days?"* (October 30, 2000, translated from Chinese and Italics added).

The word "they" in the message above appears, in several of the discussions – groups of Hong Kong individuals who often demonstrated to proclaim their freedom in the SAR and forgot the "other" local and the national interests. It seems that the identifiable numbers of professional writers and their frequency of participation also outweighed the locals, and altogether they could effectively and efficiently manipulate the flow of argument. Whereas some messages framed and labelled the local dissidents, others were well organised professional arguments written from explicit political points of view:

> When US president [C]linton held his press conference in HK,…[w]hy local reporter union has no question for such a slight to their "professionalism"[?] Why no reporters stood up and asked the US president, how come your country selected our country embassy in Belgrade and fired four missiles at our people, including fellow journalists. (I hope these reporters can comprehend they are Chinese, and HK is part of China when China reclaimed Her sovereignty over HK from the English colonialist in 1997.) When the Western politicians and activists in a chorus chanting "free Tibet," "Taiwan's right should be protected," why it has to be left to our Premiere Zhu Rongji to lecture these trouble makers that they have no ideas about the Tibet history, and current liberated living condition[?] … [W]hy they would not alert to the biased position of these trouble makers towards China, They are from a position after they have completed their whole-house-cleansing (as opposed to their favorite: ethnic cleansing in denouncing of Kosovo Serbs) of the indigenous people by killing, or rounding off whole people in their time. Why our local reporters instead of finding out these Western trouble makers real interests and motives, have reported those Western accusations of China and Hong Kong as an international truth standard (October 29, 2000, originally written in English).

This message not only criticises local Hong Kong journalists, but at the same time espouses an official PRC viewpoint over the issue of union of China with Taiwan, the anti-Tibet independence movement, and the diplomatic view on Western military action and American domination. The submission ends with "to be continued," and it is followed by arguments and other discussions, all of which collectively form an organised and well-laid out "movement," one that is taken well beyond the originally discussed issue and is designed to effectively combat "dissident" views.

Sporadic Resistance and Strategies

Compared to the organised professional front, the defence of the local is sporadic, occasional and brief. Their arguments also vary in quality. While some rebuked the pro-China views with rational arguments, some just blame them, for example, saying that communists are "hypocrites" (October 28, 2000, translated from Chinese). However, this is not to suggest that the amateur and participatory citizenry are in essence impotent. Although these amateurs are not well organised they convey their ideas with enthusiasm and often exhibit shrewd individual resistance strategies.

When political deliberation is not likely to transform politics in a closed political system of domination, the online community can simply put forth extreme and

radical voices of resistance. The remote form of democracy then serves as a channel for such dialogue and discussion of ideas of extremity to take shape. One local participant said:

> *He is saying nothing new. Jiang also came to tell people they should give priority on Hong Kong's stability and prosperity, not to fight for freedom for the sake of freedom, which may eventually ruin the economy. This is empty talk because people do not gain any benefit. I think that's enough. There is no need to talk about foreigners, use foreign to reflect his knowledge and horizon…. Comparing journalists who also meet foreigners and go overseas, Jiang does not necessarily meet more and see more. It is not journalists who cannot be criticized. But there is no need to do so, and this is not the proper way* (October 30, 2000).

This message challenged Jiang's action, and used the words "empty talks" to describe the political leader's speech, which constitutes a serious seditious crime in mainland China. Such wordings were taboo for the existing mass media in Hong Kong and the PRC but they were not officially banned in this remote chat room space. Such messages would either be officially censored or self-censored in various traditional Chinese media. The person who called out for the "Hong Kong priority" also indirectly challenged the legitimacy and "insulted" the leadership by claiming that local journalists are far more knowledgeable than the political leader of the PRC. Another discussant promoted an even more radical viewpoint:

> *All net-friends, you may not be friends of the PRC. I hope you are not. It is simply because the people over there have no freedom of thoughts anymore. I am very happy about the return of Hong Kong to China, but what I hate most is that what is done in Hong Kong and said in Hong Kong is not as "active" as it was in the past. This time, I want you to know from the event that Jiang criticized Hong Kong media, this is the so-called freedom [in this new system]. In fact, you don't need to worry too much. Even in China, there are many people opposed to the communist party … at least some people from Hainan Island (one of the provinces in China) do. You know what? I sometimes hate the Nationalist Party (of Taiwan) because they gave up the Hainan Island* (October 30, 2000, translated from Chinese).

The radicalism of this argument lies in linking the Nationalist Party of Taiwan to a challenge of the PRC. This is politically incorrect and again constitutes a death penalty in China. Even within the local, this might not be an acceptable view. However, the extreme nature of these ideas had an effect upon the professional writers. In terms of rationality of arguments, while the local arguments may not be so organised, the ideas were unique enough to pose problems for the PRC members who had to spontaneously respond to them. For example, professional writers would not casually interrupt the discussion above, and insert some anti-Taiwanese elements simply because even official bodies of the PRC locally in Hong Kong might feel restrained from engaging in PRC-Taiwan politics. Accordingly, the powerlessness of the professional writers to respond to radical viewpoints occasionally empowered the amateur citizen.

The participants may also choose to interrupt the effectiveness and coherence of PRC arguments with short responses related or unrelated to the previous argu-

ments. Most of these statements did not react to the discussion on an ad hoc basis but proactively generated new viewpoints. Although the professional writers had comprehensively organised the discussions, these new ideas upset their game plan as they were suddenly jammed and inserted among the messages of dominant discourse and thereby obliging a response. This provoked the pro-China groups to devote extra effort to create another new line of argument to react to them, and discard their original arguments.

Two examples of this are: "Jiang's skill of criticism is too bad" (October 30, 2000, translated from Chinese) and "Jiang is now proclaiming to 60 million people in the world that Chinese leaders show good manner to foreigners but the standard of manner to Chinese themselves are different" (October 30, 2000, translated from Chinese). The first example was a brief and vague statement criticising the PRC leader without elaboration, but the professionals must be responsive to it because the criticism cut into the very baseline of their political ideology, far too much to be tolerated. The second statement suddenly changed the current discussion from the appropriateness of Jiang's action to his discriminating treatment of Chinese and foreign journalists. The jamming may not be thoughtful or well-organised, but it was powerful and clear enough to compel the professional writers to generate another defensive statement.

Lastly, some participants chose to engage in silent "demonstration." This indirectly truncates the continuity of the discussion dominated by the professional pro-PRC writers. Some might also regard such a gesture as a way to show their disinterest and disrespect. By deliberately ignoring their opponents they temporarily silenced the pro-national discourse. The silence became effective opposition.

From Civil Society to Polarity

While public voices are muted by the authorities and the press practices self-censorship, virtual space represented an opportunity for the public to engage and influence the government – albeit in a piecemeal and sporadic manner. Although virtual space could have served as a remote form of democracy, the authorities have extended their influence here and attempted to occupy the space outright in an attempt to prevent the opposition from prevailing.

To summarise, these findings elaborate the strategies and forms of political engagement of this online system in the light of the relatively controlled political systems. The electronic chat room is now a polarised site where the authorities and the non-authorities communities engage, disparage and overwhelm each other. Rather than a plurality of opinions in civic sense, the space constitutes struggles of bi-polarity. The function of the remote sphere is thus very different from what Habermas originally conceived. The public sphere Habermas (1962) suggested was one in which practical reason was legitimated through norms of rational critical discourse that determined decisions of the administrative state and served as a mode of social integration. In this case study the public sphere has been reduced from a civil society to a site of struggle. To answer the research question, the findings simply suggest that we could not find continuities of democratic discursive practices for ordinary participants in this most recent and remote citadel.

Colonisation of the Satellite Sphere and the Politics of Appearance

There is an inherent dilemma in such a remote public sphere. Forms of remote democracy were conceived of as mediums that were less potent in swaying public opinion, forming factions and pressuring governmental administration. However, ironically, the online community seeks to expand its scope of influence, attract the locus of public attention, and lure political elites into participation. When no longer detached from mainstream politics, it will begin to merge with it. At this point authorities will be increasingly drawn into the politics of struggle. In authoritarian states, where mainstream politics is closely watched, the extension of mainstream space into the remote forms has the effect of annihilating it.

What was observed in the singtao.com electronic chat room was a tendency toward erosion of the kind of remote democracy, where, owing to its peripheral nature, they had been hither-to-for been left undistributed. Unlike the formal channel of mass media in which there had recurring self-censorship or normative influence from government – and that kind of control seemed normalised – the control of the virtual media observed is less apparent and formal. Instead of a top-down official control, the authorities or representatives of the authorities colonised the virtual space with "professional writers" thus creating bottom-up participatory control. In essence, it reserved the forms and rules of electronic democracy, but the voices of authority were represented and amplified. It is what I called a satellite sphere in that a satellite is far away and remote from the centre of politics but its spread of influence can be wide. The result can be positive or negative depending on who is holding the remote control. Thus, from the perspective of the authority, to overwhelm the virtual space with its representative voice is essential in maintaining internal stability and in diluting oppositional opinions.

The question is whether we still need virtual space when public deliberation is replaced by political struggle. I would suggest that the satellite sphere still represents "a space of appearance." It gives a dual political function. It sustains the citizenry and the residuals of civic society. Given that the door to mass media is closed, it grants every citizen a repeated opportunity to articulate their own beliefs – even though they know that their voices will soon be overwhelmed – the satellite sphere gives the dissidents the appearance of concreteness. It also gives the appearance of alternative ideologies.

Free Audience in a Closed Political Space

This study examines how sensitive political discussions transpire in a closed political context. This study also examines how discussants in a chat room in a Hong Kong online newspaper attempted to create a politically free space for exchange in an environment subject to limited regulation. Through an analysis of the contributions to a chat room discussion, two groups of participants could be identified, those engaged for professional reasons and those that could be described as "ordinary" citizens or amateur participants. However, their "real" identities, interests, and organisational affiliations are unknown. Through cross-checking via an interview with the newspaper editor-in-chief and via information from other informants, it was possible to confirm that some of the discussants were, indeed, professional journalists camouflaging themselves as "ordinary" citizens. It was not possible, however, to determine further information from these sources regarding

audience composition, organisation, and intention. The general conclusion of this study casts doubt on the general principle of "one city, two systems" that dominates the relationship between Hong Kong and the Chinese authorities. The study further is sceptical of the ability of new communication technologies like the Internet, particularly communication services like chat rooms, to be able to remould the dominant form of political practice present in a closed society. This study, however, was exploratory in nature and, as such, limited in providing understanding of the connection between the coercive practices to formal political structures. The broader implications of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle have yet to be addressed. When the PRC places the priority of the "One Country" over the "Two Systems," there may exist formal and structural forms of control in online spaces of Hong Kong. This is a theoretical concern about the state and control in this sensitive research field, something, which happens more frequently in a non-western authoritative context, but is rarely discussed in research methodologies for studying new communication technology.

In most studies, reliance by researchers on a service provider for additional information about the audience may be influenced by the preconceived agendas of the service provider and its political affiliation. Rather than engaging in "passive" research to "wait and see" – which might just result in the researcher collecting a distorted picture of the data – it is suggested here that researchers engage in action research. Collaborative projects with existing media and service providers to self-start and create a free electronic chat room could provide a practical solution: it not only helps understand the gate-keeping process and the agenda of the service provider (and yet keep an open, autonomous space), but also enhances tracing sources of participation, the identity and composition of the participants with the login and membership information of the participants, provided that the researchers have acted ethically and indicated on the site that they will use the public posted messages for research purposes. Researchers from educational or research institutions who work with the media or service providers can often avoid external interference and government control. Such a privileged position, in alliance with democratically oriented institutions through an action research model, can perhaps contribute to both understanding and transforming such electronic forums for public debate.

Notes:

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2. The legal specification can be found in the *Joint Declaration of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Question of Hong Kong*, signed by the British and Chinese Government on December 19, 1984 in Beijing.

3. During the peak of the dot.com trend in 2000, there was once a number of online news websites such as hongkong.com, sina.com, yahoo.com.hk and *CyberDaily,* although many were subsequently downsized and then folded after the IT stock plunge.

4. For example, after 1997, the Hong Kong government decided to build the Cyberport – an equivalent of Silicon Valley in San Francisco – to accommodate all these new online industries. Favourable news about the government's determination to go "high-tech" dominated the news headline until the fall of the dot com business world-wide.

5. The One Country Two Systems ideal is problematic and has created many political and social problems as is the case when the interest of the "One Country" (PRC) contradicts the local interest which practices capitalism through a Western legal system.

6. Legal registration as companies or as cyber newspapers are still required by these sites, although this does not pose an immediate threat that the government will ban the dissident online sites or press.

7. Political participation, as Nagel (1987:1) pointed out, "refers to action through which ordinary members of a political system influence or attempt to influence outcomes." Kaase and Marsh (1979) also added that participation should also include the voluntary activities by individual citizens with the intention of exercising influence directly or indirectly over governmental affairs. Regardless of the activities, conception of political participation in civil society focuses on the intent, that is, the possible consequences of the participation. The concept was also operationalized in empirical measures of the 1989-1990 American Citizen Participation Study undertaken by Verba, Schlozman and Brandy (1979) and Verba and Nie (1972) who gauged the participation in terms of the fundamental motivations of the people's action. Based on this widely accepted notion, when people have access and are connected to the media, online media or other channels of expression, this is considered participation because their voices can sway public opinion and eventually contribute to socio-political transformation and integration.

8. The public talk on press freedom was organised by the author of this paper on May 4, 2001 at City University of Hong Kong. The author also interviewed him on March 21, 2001 before the talk.

9. As a matter of fact, Hong Kong's electronic chat room plays a significant role in politics in Greater China. Because of its specific role as SARHK, Hong Kong is the only place in China in which very critical and dissident opinions are found. There are occasionally such chat rooms established by some grassroots and semi-official organisations in China but they will be banned once they are discovered by the authorities.

10. All these postings are publicly available information, and the author also informed the editor of the study and obtained verbal consent from the editor to use information from the site.

11. These are senior journalists or the authors' informants in the field. These informants provide the author with some of the background of the industry and the changes of the field. Their identities are kept confidential.

12. For example, it is apparent that several postings with different names are expressing similar viewpoint and literally using similar non-local languages and argue that they are in fact from the same community or grouping. This was verified by the editor who could tell if the participants actually login through the same channel. Other informants could tell if they belong to certain organisations, which try to manipulate opinions. As a matter of fact, there used to be in existence a group of writers in a department of the New China News Agency, the former pseudo-presence of the Chinese official organs in Hong Kong, which was responsible for contributing articles in Hong Kong media to influence public opinion.

13. The names of the authors of the posting (and some others quoted later) are deliberately deleted to protect them from identification.

14. On October 28, 2000, the headline news was the issue of Jiang publicly comparing the Hong Kong journalists with Western journalists and implying that their knowledge level is low and that they lack experience. He also criticised them as being "too simple" and "sometimes naďve." The approach was to interview both democrats and some pro-China figures to balance the issue.

15. Jiang Zimen was also reported telling other journalists that he was not naming the "non-loyal" Hong Kong journalists. He also denied that he was unsatisfied with the media performance in his speech because of the fact that the Hong Kong people criticised the PRC-appointed Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Tung Chee Hwa too seriously (October, 21, 2001). Plain and balanced coverage of Jiang's media theory lasted until December 22, 2000.

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