

1. In reality there is no other way to start viewing any phenomena except through one's own reality and perception and then moving toward making observations and even generalizations, so I am not suggesting that only feminists speak as persons. What I am saying is that as a critical feminist scholar, I privilege speaking through revealing this personal location as it intersects with the phenomena I am researching.
2. The "Kelly's World" blog (<http://www.kgadams.net/2006/06/11/my-second-life-deflowering>) describes scripted objects as follows: "Objects a user creates can have scripted behaviors—a table could have a fold out extension, or those cars I mentioned could wiggle. Even more intriguing, an object's behavior could be based on something outside the game: virtual weather in an area could be based on real-world weather reports, for example—or a soccer ball could move based on telemetry from a real-world soccer ball."

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The Internet and New Chinese Migrants

BRENDA CHAN

THE CHINESE DIASPORA — OLD MIGRANTS, NEW MIGRANTS

The Chinese diaspora is one of the major global diasporas, and Chinese communities exist in many corners of the earth, from Oceania and Africa to Europe and America (Cohen 1997, 85–94; Pan 1998). Emigration from China was most significant from the 1850s to 1920s, when massive numbers of Chinese, usually men of peasant origin, left China for Southeast Asia and other parts of the world as indentured labor, working in tin mines and on plantations (Wang 1991, 6).

Between the 1950s to the late 1970s there was little movement in and out of the People's Republic of China (PRC) because of restrictive policies under the Communist government. Migration resumed only after 1979 with the implementation of economic reforms and the opening up of China (Skeldon and Hugo 1999, 335–36). Departures began to increase after 1984, when new laws permitted Chinese nationals to study abroad if they paid their own fees (Guerassimoff 1998, 145), but only a minority of these self-financed students returned to China (*ibid.*, 150). A significant number of Chinese students also remained in foreign countries after the Tiananmen incident

in 1989 (Nyíri 1999, 29). The revival in Chinese emigration from the PRC accelerated in the 1990s, as population pressure intensified competition for jobs, educational opportunities, marital partners, and social status in the emerging consumer society among urban communities (ibid., 28). Students in China are also caught up in the fervor to pursue foreign education, with some twenty-five thousand students going overseas for education annually (H. Liu 2005, 294–96).

Scholars have used the term *xin yimin*, or “new migrants,” to designate PRC citizens who emigrated after 1979, when the economic reforms began in China (Nyíri 2001, 145; H. Liu 2005, 293). Hong Liu (2005, 293) has identified four main categories of new migrants from mainland China: students-turned-migrants (those who study abroad and may subsequently take up residence in their host countries), emigrating professionals, chain migrants (who join family members or relatives who are living abroad), and illegal immigrants.

However, these new migrants or *xin yimin* are different from Chinese migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan and from the overseas Chinese who settled over several generations in Southeast Asia as well as other parts of the world. Unlike the earlier waves of Chinese migration that consisted mainly of unskilled labor hailing from South China, there is a sizable segment of highly educated professionals among the *xin yimin*, alongside a proletarian diaspora (ibid., 304). The native-place origins of *xin yimin* are more diverse and can be traced to many different cities and provinces all over China (ibid., 299). Moreover, most of the *xin yimin* were raised in Communist China and carry with them “a collective memory of mainland China prior to their migration” (Sun 2002, 143–44)—with the nationwide fame in the early 1960s and the Cultural Revolution as two significant events etched permanently in their collective memories. Sun (ibid., 9) prefers to designate these *xin yimin* as “paradiasporic” in their transnational condition, because of the continual engagements and attachments that they retain with the “motherland.” Their identities, which are so deeply conditioned by the experiences of Communist China, will be further complicated as they confront the foreign cultures that they have entered for work and study.

FROM IMMIGRANT ORGANIZATIONS TO CYBER-COMMUNITIES

Ethnic Chinese communities outside of China have relied on three important institutions in maintaining a collective sense of Chinese identity: voluntary organizations (such as chambers of commerce and clan associations), Chinese-language education, and Chinese-language media (Sun 2005, 68).

Increasingly, the Internet—in the form of Web sites, online magazines, bulletin board systems (BBS), newsgroups, and so on—complements ethnic newspapers, radio stations, and satellite television as a component of diasporic Chinese media, providing new Chinese migrants with the latest news of social and political affairs in China and keeping them entertained with popular cultural products in the Chinese language: “Media images, in the form of DVD, VCD, MTV, such as films, television dramas, music videos, not to mention the Internet and satellite TV, have also proliferated and multiplied, reinforcing, destabilizing, and challenging prior understanding of what it means to be Chinese” (ibid., 66).

Moreover, the Internet, as a technology, is able to combine information storage, interactivity, and broadcasting, thus overcoming the limitations of traditional media. Mass communication is typically impersonal—one-way—and rarely involves its receivers as communicators. The Internet, on the other hand, offers its users the opportunity to generate and disseminate their own content. With its interactive environment, the Internet facilitates reciprocity between individual communicators (such as in e-mail) as well as participation in various discussion groups (Holmes 1997, 36), giving rise to new social formations called virtual communities, which are based on common interests rather than physical proximity (Rheingold 1993, 24).

Together with ethnic media, clan associations and other community organizations have traditionally been “important players in defining Chinese identity in diasporic Chinese communities, in mediating between native-place ties and the environment of the host society” (Chan 2006, 23). New Chinese migrants are more educated, mobile, and technology savvy than the earlier waves of unskilled Chinese immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. They tend to form voluntary organizations based on alumni networks and professional ties rather than primordial kinship or native-place affiliation (H. Liu 2005, 306), and they also form virtual communities on the Internet (such as newsgroups, bulletin boards, and discussion forums), which are often able to perform functions similar to the off-line voluntary organizations (Chan 2006, 23–24).

Wenli Chen’s (2006, 79–91) study on mainland Chinese immigrants in Singapore affirms that new Chinese migrants actively seek and provide social support on the Internet in their process of adapting to the host society—for instance, seeking advice on how to use the public transportation system, exchanging computer software, and finding friends to play online games with. Migrants turn to virtual communities to obtain information, emotional support, and companionship, because the Internet is easily accessible

in Singapore and affords anonymity to users. This takes away any social stigma or threat to the migrant's "face" when seeking advice, counsel, and assistance (ibid., 145). Virtual communities also play an important role in rallying Chinese immigrants to fight for social or political justice when immigrants encounter discrimination and unfair treatment in the host society. For instance, computer networks formed by Chinese students collected online signatures and mobilized Chinese students to protest against a CBS News story in 1994 that called the Chinese students in the United States "the biggest spy network in America" (Wu 1999, 85).

Most of the past studies on virtual communities formed by new Chinese migrants are centered on the North American case, with Chinese News Digest as the premier example of the Chinese transnational cyber-community (D. Liu 1999, 195–206; G. Yang 2003, 469–90; Sun 2002). CND was originally a news-distribution network founded by a group of mainland Chinese students and scholars in the United States and Canada in 1991, growing out of a concern about political events in China after the Tiananmen Square incident. It circulated China-related news to Chinese readers all over the world via weekly English publications and disseminated the first Chinese-language Internet magazine, *Huaxia Wenzhai* (Sun 2002, 118). Today, the CND Web site continues to host *Huaxia Wenzhai* and various discussion forums, and it also maintains a database containing a virtual library on modern Chinese history and a number of online archives (Wong 2003; G. Yang 2003, 474). The permanent virtual archives created by the CND feature online articles and photographs for three traumatic national events in the history of modern China: the Nanjing Massacre, the Cultural Revolution, and the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen Square incident (Sun 2002, 120).

In her analysis of CND's virtual museum on the Nanjing Massacre, Wanning Sun concludes that the Internet amplifies the dispersal and displacement of the new Chinese migrants, as shown in their pursuit of an essentialized notion of Chinese identity in cyberspace, in order to reconcile their fragmented identities in real life:

In the case of Chinese scholars now living in North America, Japan, and other Western countries, in order to remain Chinese, one has to keep telling stories of being Chinese. Collective memories of China are kept alive by these self-exiled Chinese . . . by the constant retelling of familiar national stories. . . . What seems uncanny is that in spite of, or perhaps because of, the tension between new technology, which is memoryless and deterritorialized, and memory, which is bound by a

specific notion of time and place, the Internet and its attendant cyberspace prove to be hugely enabling in articulating a strategically "pure" collective subjectivity. (ibid., 132–33)

This essentialist Chinese identity that dominates the discourses in news-groups and Web sites by new Chinese migrants tends to assume a kind of distinctive Chineseness built on the imaginary of a unitary territorial nation of China and a shared history of being oppressed by an imperialist "Other," such as Japan (Sun 2002, 122–31).

While Chinese students and new Chinese migrants retain a strong attachment to China and have a strong sense of Chinese identity, Wening Xie (2005, 399–403) argues that virtual communities formed by these migrants help them to understand the lifestyles and practices of the host society, thereby facilitating adaptation to the new environment. However, Srivinas R. Melkote and D. J. Liu (2000, 499) suggest that although use of the Chinese Ethnic Internet (consisting of Internet magazines, bulletin boards systems, and Web sites) can help Chinese students and scholars in the United States learn about and adapt to the American lifestyle (such as dress and food), the greater the dependency on Chinese Internet programs, the lower their acculturation of American values and the higher and more sustained their level of Chinese values. Thus, we can see that the Internet as a "global technology can contribute to a strengthening of cultural distinctiveness, and despite the placelessness of the Internet, it can serve to reinforce place" (Mackay and Powell 1998, 215).

THE INTERNET AND THE DIASPORIC PUBLIC SPHERE

Arjun Appadurai (1996, 21–23) has postulated that electronic media and communication technologies have facilitated the emergence of *diasporic public spheres*, as migrants engage in the work of postnational imagination, through consumption of popular cultural products produced in their homelands and through exchanges and interactions with fellow migrants as well as those who remain at home. Public spheres in the present day, he argues, are no longer confined to the boundaries of the nation but are constituted by migrants across various sites and nodal points on the globe.

Guobin Yang (2002) posits that Web sites, bulletin board systems, Internet magazines, newsgroups, chat rooms, and other online spaces in Chinese language form a virtual or online Chinese cultural sphere, with users drawn from ethnic Chinese communities all over the world. He argues that the online Chinese cultural sphere approximates a transnational diasporic

public sphere, for it allows dispersed individuals and groups to gather and interact with one another to articulate personal, local, and global problems, and facilitates various forms of political activism and collective action.¹

However, Guobin Yang (2003, 470–71) concedes that his definition of the public sphere is one that is broadly conceived as an open communicative space, and is not meant to conform strictly to the Habermasian model of rational-critical debate by a bourgeois public within a nation-state. This is because online spaces in the virtual Chinese cultural sphere are diverse in form and content (e.g., interactive BBS versus noninteractive Internet newsletters), engendering multiple and partial publics that transcend national boundaries (G. Yang 2002). Because of the transborder nature of the Internet, members of the Chinese diaspora can access online spaces that are hosted in the homeland, while people in China can enter the online spaces hosted in foreign countries that are created by the diaspora population (ibid.). The discourse communities that emerge from these heterogeneous online spaces are nonetheless connected, as illustrated by the cross-posting of messages between China-based and North America-based BBS and the rise of popular well-known Web sites frequented by users from various parts of the world (ibid.). Although membership in these discourse communities is often transient and discourses in the online Chinese cultural sphere are often fraught with contradictions and irrational outbursts (ibid.), Guobin Yang is optimistic that the online Chinese cultural sphere promotes democratic participation in its function as a communication network for public expression, civic association, and transnational protests (2003, 481–82).

In the next section of the chapter, I will critically examine Guobin Yang's (2003) framework of the transnational online Chinese cultural sphere, by drawing on my past research in online communities formed by new Chinese migrants in Singapore, as well as where I live and work as a locally born Chinese woman. The original purpose of the research was to examine how new Chinese migrants in Singapore use the Internet in the construction and maintenance of their cultural identities and build solidarity as a diasporic community. Singapore presents a unique and interesting case study because the new Chinese migrants in Singapore are living in a host society where ethnic Chinese already constitute the majority of the population. This is unlike the situation of Chinese students and immigrants in almost all other countries in the world, where they are an ethnic minority in the host society and face a hardened boundary between the Self and the Other in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture.

Singapore is a tiny island republic in Southeast Asia with a land area of only 690 square kilometers. Originally a British trading colony founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, Singapore attained independence in 1965 after a brief merger with Malaya. During the colonial period, the establishment of a free entry port in Singapore by the British attracted large numbers of immigrants from China, India, and the neighboring regions (Vasil 2000, 1–4). The early Chinese immigrants in Singapore were coolies and traders who saw themselves as sojourners who would eventually return to China. By 1849 the number of Chinese had exceeded that of the indigenous Malays, and the former became the majority of the population (Chiew 1995, 42). Today, with a resident population of about 3.3 million, Singapore remains a multiethnic society made up of ethnic Chinese (76.8 percent), Malays (13.9 percent), Indians (7.9 percent), and other ethnic minorities (1.4 percent) (Singapore Department of Statistics n.d.).

Since the 1990s, the Singapore government has adopted a selective migration policy with attractive initiatives to draw skilled professionals and entrepreneurs, to alleviate the problems of an aging population and the need to maintain economic competitiveness in a knowledge economy (Low 2002, 409–25; Yap 1999). The Singapore government also offers scholarships to mainland Chinese students with good academic backgrounds, which allows them to pursue tertiary education in Singapore, after which the scholarship recipients are obliged to work in the host country for a number of years (Woguo shi zhongguo 2006). These favorable policies attract mainland Chinese to move to Singapore for study and employment.

There are altogether some thirty-three thousand students from mainland China who are enrolled in public schools, private schools, polytechnics, and universities in Singapore (Chan 2006, 9). Singapore also imports about a hundred thousand migrant workers from China, most of whom are employed in the construction industry (R. Yang 2002). These migrant laborers are typically not granted permanent residence or citizenship in Singapore. There are also an increasing number of PRC nationals hired in the service sectors as wait staff, sales assistants, and so on (Toh and Sudderudin 2007). Besides students and migrant workers, there is another group of transients known as *peidu mama*, or “study mothers.” These study mothers accompany their children to Singapore on a special visa, for the latter’s primary school or secondary school education. They are allowed to stay in Singapore and may apply for work passes, subject to approval by the authorities (Huang and Yeoh 2005, 386–88). The Singapore government does not

release official statistics on the exact number of new migrants from mainland China, but it is estimated that the country hosts between two and three hundred thousand new Chinese migrants (H. Liu 2005, 295).

Despite their growing presence, the new migrants from mainland China are not entirely welcome by the local Chinese community with open arms. The local-born Chinese Singaporeans have acquired a local way of life and a strong sense of Singaporean national identity (Chiew 2002, 34–35), and therefore perceive themselves as being very different from the Chinese from the PRC. Perhaps more documented in mass media and popular fiction (rather than academic research) is the animosity between the local-born Chinese Singaporeans and the new Chinese migrants from the PRC. The former think that new Chinese migrants are competing with local-born Chinese Singaporeans for jobs. For instance, during his National Day Rally speech in 2001, then prime minister of Singapore Goh Chok Tong criticized the attitude of a young Chinese Singaporean, who wrote to the largest English newspaper in Singapore, *The Straits Times*, labeling mainland Chinese migrants as “cheena” (a derogatory term somewhat similar to “chink” in the United States) and describing them as “a crude lot” (2001). Furthermore, female migrants from mainland China (often dubbed as *xiaolongnu*, or “dragon girls,” by local-born Chinese Singaporeans) are stereotyped as gold diggers who seduce Singaporean men and break up Singaporean families.

On the other hand, new Chinese migrants in Singapore complain that they have been looked down upon or discriminated by the Chinese Singaporeans, as Chinese Singaporeans hold misconceptions that China is a poor and backward country. Although both Chinese Singaporeans and mainland Chinese perceive each other as belonging to the same ethnicity, the mainland Chinese in Singapore see themselves as the “authentic bearers of Chinese culture” (in terms of fluency in Mandarin and knowledge of China’s history and geography); they consider Chinese Singaporeans a “substandard ‘synthetic’ kind of Chinese” (Loo 1997, 4, 42). Therefore, integration into the local Chinese community in Singapore is not an automatic process for the new migrants from the PRC, despite moving into a society with a Chinese majority.

I selected two virtual communities for case study: Springdale and AutumnLeaves.² Both Springdale and AutumnLeaves are Web sites set up by mainland Chinese students in Singapore, and they provide information about studying and working in Singapore. Both Web sites host a bulletin board system with several discussion forums covering a wide range of topics,

such as current affairs, travel, creative writing, photography, gaming, life in Singapore, and so on (Chan 2006, 10–17). The discussion forums hosted on these Web sites are where virtual community emerges over time. Springdale was established by PRC students at the National University of Singapore. The bulk of its members are PRC students studying in two government-funded universities in Singapore, thus making it a more “campus-based” virtual community. Users of AutumnLeaves, on the other hand, present a more diverse profile. Its Singapore-based users include PRC students studying in various private schools and polytechnics in Singapore, permanent residents, employment-pass holders, and even *peidu mama*. It also has a larger proportion of China-based users than Springdale (ibid., 11).

Arjun Appadurai has talked about mass-mediated communities formed by migrants, in which the enmeshing of local experiences in taste, pleasure, and politics can possibly give rise to translocal social action (1996, 8). He notes that diasporic public spheres are “frequently tied up with students and other intellectuals engaging in long-distance nationalism (as with the activists from the People’s Republic of China)” (ibid., 22).

The Internet has enabled the new Chinese migrants to establish virtual communities where these migrants are able to meet friends who share the same hobbies and interests. At the same time, these online communities have been producing multiple discourses of the Chinese nation and have been engaged in the imagination of the homeland, through BBS or discussion forums that talk about politics and current affairs in China (Chan 2005). This shared imagination of the homeland could become a “staging ground” for collective action by the migrants (Appadurai 1996, 7).

I analyzed the messages posted on the discussion forums on the Springdale and AutumnLeaves Web sites, based on selected discussion threads or topics. In addition, I also conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with various members of the virtual communities and carried out participant observation during some off-line activities organized by the two communities. My quasi-ethnographic research on these two virtual communities was carried out during the period of February to October 2003, which coincided with the outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) pandemic in China and in various other Asian countries, including Singapore. This offered an opportunity for me to observe how virtual communities formed by mainland Chinese migrants in Singapore respond to a situation of the “homeland in crisis” and to learn whether the Internet might promote long-distance nationalism.

THE SARS EPIDEMIC AND LONG-DISTANCE NATIONALISM

SARS is a type of atypical pneumonia. It was believed that SARS first appeared in Guangdong, China, as early as November 2002, although the disease was first officially reported in February 2003. The disease later spread to Beijing and other areas in China. SARS also spread via international air travel to Vietnam, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Canada (World Health Organization 2003, 1-2). By May 2, 2003, afflicted areas in China included Beijing, Tianjin, and the provinces of Hebei, Inner Mongolia, and Shanxi (World Health Organization Representative Office in China 2003).

During this period, mainland Chinese students in Singapore rallied around the crisis of the SARS outbreak, seeking to raise funds to aid in the anti-SARS efforts in China. Participation from virtual communities in these efforts was uneven, and limited in terms of influence. The Singapore Chinese Student Committee, an off-line group made up of PRC student representatives from various educational institutions in Singapore, co-organized a charity concert with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. The charity concert, called Youzi Qing, was held on June 7, 2003, to raise funds for the Red Cross Society in China, in aid of anti-SARS efforts in the mainland. Springdale and AutumnLeaves were invited as official Web sites for the charity concert, and each Web site sent a representative to sit on the organizing committee of the concert.

However, the Internet played only a marginal role in the concert, merely as one of the means of publicity. AutumnLeaves initially created a special Web page for the concert with a forum, but the Web page was underutilized by the organizing committee of the concert. It was never updated with information about the concert, and there were only two posts in the forum. Ticket sales were pushed almost entirely over the telephone, via interpersonal networks of mainland Chinese students in the polytechnics, universities, and private schools. As a virtual community AutumnLeaves had intended to go beyond the use of its Web site as a publicity vehicle for the concert. A group of AutumnLeaves members, who had formed a rock band, wanted to perform at the concert in the name of the virtual community. Unfortunately, the rock band failed to get through the auditions for the concert program. This created a lot of unhappiness among the AutumnLeaves members. Those who had initially intended to render support to the rock band even threatened to boycott the concert.

While the Internet can play a role in supporting long-distance nationalism, we must not assume that the Internet will always be a powerful and effective medium in mobilizing migrants into collective action. We have

to consider the attitudes that people carry toward Internet technology that could prevent full exploitation of the Internet. We also have to take into account divisive factors within and outside of cyber-communities formed by migrants, which could limit the influence and power of these communities in organizing large-scale activities with off-line impact.

During the SARS crisis, a particular incident attracted more attention from the new Chinese migrants in Singapore and sparked a fervent debate in the forums of Springdale and AutumnLeaves. In April 2003, Goh Chok Tong, then prime minister of Singapore, canceled plans to visit China because of the SARS outbreak. He made the decision upon advice by his doctor. From my analysis of the discussion threads in Springdale and AutumnLeaves surrounding this event, it was evident that the new Chinese migrants found it difficult to understand why Goh, an ethnic Chinese, would cancel the official visit (Chan 2005). The decision by Goh stood in contrast to the actions of the then French prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who visited China during the same period in spite of the SARS epidemic (BBC 2003).

The mainland Chinese migrants had assumed that local-born Chinese Singaporeans would have a stronger sense of affinity and empathy with China due to common ancestry with the Chinese people. Hence, many were puzzled and offended by Goh Chok Tong's cancellation of his trip to China. In the new Chinese migrants' online discussion of this incident, there were "outbursts of crude nationalism" in the messages posted to the forums in Springdale and AutumnLeaves (Chan 2005, 356). Some forum participants saw China as a regional power and called for China to impose sanctions or take military action against Singapore. For instance:

China should punish all those who oppose her, like the U.S. does. (Chumeiren, Springdale)

Bomb Singapore till she sinks! (pinwheel, AutumnLeaves) (Chan 2005, 355)

In online debates such as these, Internet discussion forums become spaces in which new Chinese migrants can indulge in a fantasy of the homeland as a superpower, as a means to challenge the perceived hegemony of the United States in the international political economy, and to vent their frustrations of being marginalized in the host society (Chan 2005, 362-63).

Of course, the Internet places a heavier burden on the agency of the user, to seek out the information he or she wants, compared to the audience in traditional media. Moreover, the Internet tends to foster communities

based on shared interests rather than physical proximity, drawing together like-minded people in fragmented groups (Wellman and Gulia 1999, 172). Therefore, jingoistic messages posted by migrants online may be exposed to only a portion of the population that has Internet access; there may not be a critical mass around such discussion that will directly affect off-line interaction between migrants and the "natives."

On the other hand, if these messages were brought to the attention of the general public in the host society, it could lead to resentment and enmity between the migrants and the natives. For AutumnLeaves, its worst nightmare came true when an English tabloid in Singapore ran a lengthy news story in April 2004, quoting a posting on its forum by an eighteen-year-old PRC student. In his posting the PRC student called Singaporean students stupid, saying that "Singaporeans' brains are fed with pigswill" (Chia 2004). The news article also recorded other negative comments about Singaporeans that were made by the forum participants. The story, which was subsequently picked up by the Chinese press in Singapore, resulted in a jump in visitor traffic on the AutumnLeaves Web site, as many Singaporeans and PRC migrants engaged in a flaming war on the forum surrounding the issue. In an online statement to its users, AutumnLeaves administrators blamed the media for irresponsible reporting, arguing that the journalist had completely ignored other posts in the forum that were friendly toward Singaporeans.

This incident showed that once abusive and jingoistic messages are leaked out to the mainstream mass media beyond the confines of cyberspace, the friction between mainland Chinese migrants and Singaporeans can be exaggerated or magnified to unrealistic proportions. This will make it harder for the two groups to reconcile with each other and could add to the migrants' reluctance to integrate into mainstream society.

THE LIMITS OF VIRTUALITY

In the preceding section I have shown how online BBS formed by new Chinese migrants fall short of the normative conditions of rational-critical debate that should prevail in the public sphere, as idealized by Jürgen Habermas (1989, 27–31). Whether the Internet facilitates the formation of a public sphere remains a debatable issue today, as some scholars argue that online debate and interaction are fragmented into virtual groups of people with similar ideological positions, gathering together to reinforce each other's opinions (Dahlberg 2007, 828). As Kevin A. Hill and John E. Hughes (1997, 17–20) have concluded from their study, discussion groups on the Internet practice a form of ideological policing, in that people tend to post messages

in newsgroups that are inclined toward a similar political stance as their own, and ideologically dissonant posts are more likely to be flamed or attacked.

In fact, Cass Sunstein maintains that the Internet supports the development of "deliberative enclaves" and becomes "a breeding ground for group polarization and extremism" (2001, 67, 71). To assess the contribution and potential of the Internet in encouraging democratic communication would require reconceptualizing the public sphere into an alternative model that can accommodate radical discursive contestation (Dahlberg 2007, 841), and from a state-centric focus to a transnational sphere (G. Yang 2003, 471). Even with the redefinition of the concept of the public sphere, I am still concerned about whether an online public sphere will accelerate the formation of "ethnic enclaves" on the Internet that will deepen the differences and tensions between diasporic communities and their host societies. Given that the voice of a diasporic community may be marginalized and excluded in the dominant discourse of the host society, a diasporic public sphere in cyberspace can allow migrants to gather together and lobby for issues that advance their social and political rights (Dahlberg 2007, 837). But can the diasporic public sphere promote interaction, discussion, and understanding between a diasporic community and the host society, or will it lead to "a hardening and non-engagement (both online and offline) with oppositional identities?" (ibid., 841).

Besides considering the functions of the online Chinese cultural sphere in public expression and civic association, we also need to critically reflect on its potential to mobilize the Chinese diaspora in various forms of collective action. The role of the Internet was rather limited when the virtual communities of Springdale and AutumnLeaves were involved with the Youzi Qing charity concert. While the Internet may have an impact on the configuration of social and political relations on local and global scales, Jayne Rodgers has cautioned against taking a technological-deterministic approach in dealing with the Internet and activism, reminding us that "social movements existed long before the Internet did" (Rodgers 2003, 5).

By the same token, long-distance nationalism preceded the development of the Internet. The overseas Chinese had historically been known to be involved in long-distance nationalism, from the monetary assistance they rendered to Sun Yat-sen in overthrowing the Qing dynasty to the raising of funds in aid of China's war effort against Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. Sandor Vegh (2003, 71–72) also distinguishes between "Internet-based" and "Internet-enhanced" types of activism. In Internet-based strategies, the Internet is used for activities that are only possible online, such as a virtual sit-in, a spamming campaign, and hacking or sabotaging a particular

Web site. In Internet-enhanced strategies, the Internet is used to support or enhance the activities of the social movement, such as increasing levels of awareness or coordinating action more efficiently.

When studying the relationship between the Internet and long-distance nationalism, we should consider whether this particular technology is introducing something new to the ways in which social movements represent themselves, that is, whether the Internet is transforming opportunities for activists by creating new ways of networking and exchanging information. In other words, perhaps we ought to view the Internet "as a tool of political activism, rather than the genesis of it" (Rodgers 2003, 3–6).

NOTES

1. G. Yang (2003) also developed and expounded fully upon the idea of the online Chinese cultural sphere.
2. Pseudonyms are used for all the virtual communities mentioned in this chapter. Research on Springdale and AutumnLeaves was carried out for my Ph.D. dissertation. For discussion of the main findings of the research study, see Chan 2005, 336–68; and 2006.

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