Identity politics, resistance and new media technologies

A Foucauldian approach to the study of the HKnet

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Abstract
Addressing the debate over the emancipatory potential of the internet, this article analyses the archival data of an electronic discussion group (e-group), Hong Kong Net (HKnet), to assess the use of the internet by a group of Hong Kong Chinese in the United States to engage in the construction of their own identity within the context of decolonization and the transfer of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty. The study adopts a Foucauldian perspective to examine not only the significance of the texts but also what marginal groups actually do with the text and the internet. The argument is developed that while the Hong Kong Chinese cannot evade the power of the dominant discourses of the social networks within which they are located, they are able to confirm their own independent subjectivity for themselves in this specific local site through online practice at a specific historical juncture.

Key words
China • electronic discussion group • Hong Kong • identity politics • internet • marginalization • resistance • subjectivity
Given that the internet provides inexpensive and easy access to information resources, many critics of a postmodern persuasion have promoted new media technologies (NMTs) as instruments for overcoming the disempowerment of individuals when democracy and capitalism fail to deliver their promises (White, 1991: 11). Theoretical discussions (Rheingold, 1993; Jones 1995) have also argued that new communities can crystallize around virtual cyberspaces and within texts by interacting electronically. However, such conclusions have not yet been borne out by empirical studies in the West (e.g. Bury, 1998; Dietrich, 1997; Mitra, 1996). Therefore this study aims to contribute to this ongoing debate by adopting a poststructuralist framework to analyse the use of the Hong Kong Net (HKnet) email posting group (e-group) by Hong Kong Chinese immigrants in the US, in the period just after June 1989 when the democracy movement was crushed in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Conclusions will then be drawn about the ways in which marginalized communities and individuals can use the internet to construct self-identities in cyberspace.

METHODOLOGY: TOWARD A GENEALOGICAL STUDY OF DISCOURSE

Present approaches to the study of dominated groups and minorities tend to be based on the Gramscian textual analysis of mediated signification and hegemony. This is rooted in the Marxist notion of the base/superstructure relationship, and how it can be elaborated on to further understanding of the complexities and social relationships of advanced capitalist societies and culture industries in ways that avoid economic reductionism (Grossberg, 1984; Hall, 1986; Sholle, 1988). However, a problem with this tradition is that it understands minorities’ struggle in terms of the degree of autonomy of the discursive position that they can achieve, under powerful authorities which adopt hegemonic strategies to limit the terrain of struggle and close off alternative possibilities (Frow, 1986).

The poststructuralist approach developed by Michel Foucault may be more useful than this, when it comes to rediscovering the potential of such groups for identity construction and success in the search for ‘subjectivity’. In particular, in his essay ‘What is Enlightenment’ (1984), Foucault recaptures some aspects of the Enlightenment emphasis on rational autonomy over conformity in order to gain a fuller picture of the possibilities for marginalized groups to articulate their own identity, redeem their subjectivity, and engage in resistance (Philp, 1985). The focus of analysis is thus shifted away from technologies of domination to technologies of the self (Best and Kellner, 1991: 55). Emphasis is no longer on how and where subjects are objectified through discourses and practices, but on how rational and semi-autonomous individuals engage in deliberative and free
actions within the network of power relations. The notion of ‘care of self’ developed as a consequence implies that minorities can contest power in identity politics, and are able to create their own identities as self-constituting subjects in pursuit of the goals of freedom and autonomy.

Adopting this perspective, it is proposed in this article that an understanding of the Hong Kong Chinese struggle against various forces of domination in the US can be captured by means of a Foucauldian genealogical study of ‘the effective formation of discourse’ (1972: 233). This involves the re-examination of the social field from a micro-logical standpoint, to enable the identification of discursive discontinuity and subject construction. The possibilities of resistance through practice can thus be clarified and the full complexity of historical events can be grasped. Since Foucauldian theorists argue that we can never separate power from truth, such a perspective defies the adoption of a ‘scientific method’ to content-analyse the true underlying meaning of media text, whether latent or manifest (Friedrichs, 1970; Kuhn, 1970). Instead, the notion of genealogy leads poststructuralist study to engage in the political task of recovering what Best and Kellner call the ‘autonomous discourses, knowledges, and voices suppressed through totalizing narratives’, because: ‘The subjugated voices of history speak to hidden forms of domination; to admit their speech is necessarily to revise one’s conception of what and where power is’ (Best and Kellner, 1991: 57).

To chart the genealogy, or how the subjects are connected to other forces at any particular historical moment, requires a familiarity with, and access to, historical data. Even though the history of the internet is short, Jones (1999: 23) highlights the importance of reconnecting it with the ethnographic data that researchers collect. Thanks to the organizers of HKnet, I have been able to do this by retrieving the first two volumes of electronic archives that they have compiled, providing the historical context of HKnet’s formation and development. This archive contains 20 thematic issues of email correspondence carried out between 27 April–1 June 1989, and 300 individual email discussions were analysed altogether, from which the examples cited in this paper are drawn. As the author is a subscriber to HKnet, he was also able to interview (via email) the three Chinese organizers of the group in February 1995, to gain familiarity with their way of working. Three short interviews were also carried out the following year for further clarification. A mapping of the forces of identity politics was then achieved by analysing the texts of the email discussions taken from the archive of HKnet, and then supplementing this with interview data and historical data (such as immigration data and social indicators for Hong Kong).

Using these historical data, this study of HKnet will attempt to unveil the conditions of the discourse on identity among the Hong Kong Chinese in
the US in the early 1990s, and what that discourse does to these internet users. According to the methodological postulates of poststructuralism, the method will move from the question of ‘what does it mean?’ to that of ‘what does it do?’ – from significance to its effectivity, and from textual analysis to social practice (Foucault, 1980b). Therefore, in the following analysis the data (electronic messages) are interpreted not only as they are presented, but also as the genealogical practices of real subscribers in order to explicate why they are committed to acting and reacting in certain ways within the interplay of contextual and historical forces at a certain time.

THE BACKGROUND OF HKNET

HKnet was formally inaugurated in April 1989 as a small email list for a number of students from Hong Kong who wanted to get in touch with each other in the US. As the internet was still not popular at that time, there were only a few such Hong Kong e-groups, and HKnet seems to have been the most popular. It was a non-moderated and free informal e-discussion group for exchanges among HK Chinese overseas. In the late 1980s, as an ever-increasing number of people were leaving Hong Kong for North America to study, work or emigrate (Kwong, 1993; Skeldon, 1994), HKnet announced itself to subscribers as a ‘network for exchanging home news’, and ‘for its members to share their feeling and experiences with those who have the same background’. Although the organizers never attempted to turn it into a formal organization, as the list of subscribers grew to a point when there was too much traffic, they decided to put the messages together and send them out as a single digest to subscribers every day. The popularity of the group began to wane when the number of Chinese newspaper websites and portals increased at the end of the 1990s.

Historically, HKnet performed a significant political and cultural role as a virtual site for Hong Kong Chinese in North America in the late 1980s and mid-1990s. This was partly because it was established in a period coinciding with the 1989 student movement in China, which culminated in the military suppression of 4 June. Because of the remoteness of the US and with a press ban imposed by the Chinese government in early June, members of HKnet circulated newspaper information and other materials covering events inside China to mobilize political and financial support for the students of the democracy movement among Chinese overseas (To and Wong, 1991). However, this political fever on the HKnet soon cooled down after the movement in the PRC had been quelled. The fact that many of the postings on the HKnet in 1989 were politically oriented, therefore, can be seen as something of an historical ‘accident’, in so far as such activity was generated by a particular period of crisis inside China. However, after the events in Tiananmen Square, daily dialogues and discussions on more routine cultural, social, economic and political issues
continued in the form of the HKnet Digest, a daily bulletin of topical discussions.

The active membership of HKnet culminated at around 800 during the apex of the democracy movement in China. In 1995, the organizers claimed to have 323 active subscribers and 1300 inactive subscribers. Based on statistics collected by the organizers, 211 of these subscribers were working or studying at university. At least 90 percent were from Hong Kong, including Hong Kong Chinese residents temporarily living in North America, Hong Kong Chinese settled there, American Chinese and Chinese-related organizations in the US. A few mainland Chinese and Chinese American organizations were also members.

A POSTMODERN MEDIUM FOR RESISTANCE
In poststructuralist analysis, identity has to be understood as embedded in the multiple ‘linkages’ of power that extend throughout all social and cultural practices (Foucault, 1980a: 122; 1980b: 49; see also Jordan, 1999; Scott, 1990). For the users of HKnet, these should be seen as emanating from the three interrelated regions of their identity, namely Hong Kong citizens, ethnic Chinese, and the bounds of the US society in which they are living. These are the factors constituting the networks of ‘reproductive forces’ that determine the ambivalent identity of what it means to be ‘Hong Kong Chinese’ in the US, shared by many who felt the necessity to relocate there due to cultural, political or historical reasons before the 1997 transfer of the territory to the PRC. Some migrated for family reunion; some went as exiles to avoid the Communist takeover; and many flocked to the US to study, with the hope of obtaining a green card after the suppression of the Tiananmen student movement in June 1989. Such migration was often unprepared for, abrupt and involuntary. Given the additional factor of geographical distance, the links of migrants with Hong Kong were thus often arbitrarily cut. Yet many of the individuals concerned could not shake off their Hong Kong Chinese roots, and sometimes found themselves more attached to their origins than when they had actually been living in Hong Kong.

The theme of an identity stuck between Chinese origins and the bounds imposed by immigration to the US is one that the users of HKnet often dwell on. The sense of longing is powerfully expressed in an early text posted by one of the organizers of HKnet, which states:

I like Hong Kong because I was born and raised there. There is no place better than your homeland. I can give 10,000 nice things about Hong Kong; I can also give 1,000,000 bad things about it. But they are so independent of my craving for HK. None of them can explain my strong excitement when the airplane lands [in Hong Kong] . . . I don’t like some particulars about Hong Kong, I like it for it’s my root. (HKnet, 28 April 1989; emphasis added)
Others find no contradiction in expressing a desire to stay in the US on the one hand, and an absolute rejection of the notion that their children can be American citizens who speak no Chinese and know nothing of Chinese culture on the other. The underlying ambivalence over identity is expressed by the message of one organizer who states:

I have dreamed of a rather ideal situation: Get my Ph.D., get a green card [in the US], go back to teach [in Hong Kong], . . . get married, teach some more, and go back to the States for a quiet retirement . . . (HKnet, 28 April 1989)

The ideal is to be located neither in Hong Kong nor in the US, but in both places. While the security and environment of the US is to be enjoyed, the desire to reconnect with the motherland remains strong. As one HKnet correspondent who had already been living in the US for over 11 years puts it:

Despite my long separation . . . [from Hong Kong], my feeling of not fitting in was slight and it lasted only for a few days, [when I went back to Hong Kong]. Although there were a few things I missed about the US when I was in HK, such as cleaner air, more courteous people, better working environment, and nicer climate (in Austin), I still loved HK. Maybe I felt so easy because I knew that I could come back to the US and did not have to live with the less amiable things of HK for a long time. [However,] back at the US, the words [that I heard in subway station in Hong Kong] like ‘Mind the [train] doors, please. The next station is . . . ’ still echoed in my ears. (HKnet, 4 May 1989)

Although such messages indicate that the users of HKnet cannot detach themselves culturally and emotionally from ‘Hong Kong’ – despite it being characterized as having a lower level of materialistic well-being than the US – they are not rendered passively defensive by external social forces. In fact, just participating in discussions makes them into more than mere ‘subjects’ representing the perceptions of others, and allows them to actively take part in the construction of the bona fide identity of being Hong Kong Chinese in the US. While it is all but impossible to have their identity fairly represented in American mainstream media (Van Dijk, 1993; Wilson and Gutiérrez, 1985), electronic interaction allows each user to struggle against the privileges of knowledge and discourse, forcing the individual back on himself and tying him to his own identity. When participants feel bounded by the social order in which they live, or are in danger of being subsumed under a kind of false consciousness, the HKnet intervenes and interrupts the process of domination by offering a kind of resistance that is equivalent to a ‘refusal to make sense’, or the call for the ‘discontinuity’ of social order (Chang, 1986; Chen, 1986; Foucault, 1973).

As messages posted on the HKnet indicate, users are aware that they cannot challenge the dominant ideological discourse by relying on online
media and mass media – the ideological apparatuses of the empowering class (Althusser, 1971), their extension of ‘societal rationalization’ (White, 1991: 9), and their representation of the dominant ideology (Baudrillard, 1980). There is a realization that any resistance that arises out of the mass media is probably the only way for the system to ‘contain, absorb and defuse’ opposition forces and would be bounded by the acceptable ranges of limits demarcated by the dominant ideology (Williams, 1980). As one subscriber complains, ‘you can see foreign TV programs on American TV. Still, there is no question that the so-called world news is still mostly US news . . . ’ (HKnet, 12 May 1989). Or, in the words of another:

Do you notice the World News in the States is actually American News? American talk show hosts frequently use the phrase ‘The world is listening, watching’ etc. I think I have heard the announcer for ABC using the phrase ‘The world premiere of XXX mini series.’ Does everyone in the world watch American TV? Or Americans think they are the world. (HKnet, 12 May 1989)

As subscribers vent their frustration over the dominance of the world view framed by the American media and are unwilling to comply with its associated hegemony, they use HKnet as an alternative medium within which other sets of discourse/knowledge can exist under the domination of the existing power relationships, thus providing room for identity politics. Foucault (1980a) gave the name of ‘local resistance’ to this kind of struggle in seemingly non-important sites. It is from this viewpoint that postmodern media such as email posting, newsgroups, bulletin boards, and homepages, can be seen as having the potential to become decentralizing instruments for marginalized groups, to break away from the ‘normalizing process’ of society, and to foster more autonomous means of collective identity (White, 1991). The significance of such media lies in their power to nullify the existing hegemonic social order imposed on our experiences. This can be achieved, even in such small spaces, through the formation of subcultural meanings or senses which appear to be nonsense and unimportant for the majority (Fiske, 1986).

At least two characteristics of HKnet enhance this kind of resistance. First, there is the openness of the message. The organizers never refused any single posting contributed to the network. The absence of an editorial committee and selection process simply destroys ‘the prisons of received identities and discourse of exclusion’ (Best and Kellner, 1991). The organizers make the nature of this openness manifest by stating, ‘We simply do not care about the content of the conversation’.9 Whereas people in daily life are normalized and structured as sets of binary oppositions such as rational/irrational, legitimate/illegitimate, normal/abnormal and right/wrong (Derrida, 1981, 1982), the unregulated nature of this localized medium displaces the status of this kind of meaning-endowing opposition. The
second resistance-enhancing factor is the way in which ‘differences’ (Foucault, 1973) are preserved and respected by the wide diversity of the participants in HKnet.¹⁰

Nonetheless, the emancipatory power of HKnet should not be exaggerated. It would be wrong to perceive in its e-groups a real public sphere in which a Habermasian ‘ideal speech situation’ (Habermas, 1984) is possible, or in which dialogues are free of the domination imposed by class, gender or race. In fact, when subjects participate in any social practices, they are immediately caught up within the relationships of power struggle (Foucault, 1980a). However, the important irony is that the ‘strategies’ or technologies which are used as sites of domination are not just instruments of power, but also have the potential to become the sources of liberation (LaFountain, 1989: 128).

Such a development can be seen in the way in which the discursive politics taking place on HKnet provide users with the possibility of contesting hegemonic discourses that bound subjects within the control of ‘normal’ identities. More specifically for Hong Kong Chinese in the US, this means gaining access to their own intelligibility and identity by passing through the rules and judgements that focus on ethnicity. For example, contestation of such judgements can be seen in wide-ranging debates over the way that American students perceive ‘HKers’¹¹ to be always the top students in class, and inevitably associated with subjects such as ‘CS [computer science], EE [electrical engineering], IE [industrial engineering]’ (HKnet, 8 May 1989). Whenever they go beyond these rules or norms, they are marginalized, disciplined and excluded, with those majoring in ‘unpopular’ subjects such as philosophy and Chinese referred to as settling for ‘second best’ (HKnet, 8 May 1989).

It is at such a juncture that counter-discourse can be used as ‘a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy’ (Foucault, 1980b: 101). As Best and Kellner (1991: 59) explain, ‘counter-discourses provide a lever of political resistance by encapsulating a popular memory of previous forms of oppression and struggle and a means of articulating needs and demands’. The way in which such an engagement of discourse politics by marginal groups foregrounds their own identity and facilitates the development of new forms of subjectivity and values (Foucault, 1982: 216) can be demonstrated by the ways in which the users of HKnet describe themselves. For example, one user lays down a departure point for an alternative articulation of identity by purposely dissociating herself from the ‘superiority’ that is supposed to adhere to science, stating:

A friend of mine studies Chemistry at UW-Madison. Once I asked her if there were any other oriental students in her class, and she said that there weren’t any. In fact, she never had any HK classmates in her Chemistry class. (HKnet, 10 May 1989)
Such conscious attempts to restate identity can be categorized under a genealogical approach, in terms of three dimensions of resistance that correspond to the three types of network power relationships invested in by Hong Kong Chinese in the US. First is exposure of the power and forces behind the various forms of discrimination to which Hong Kong Chinese in the US are subjected. Second is denial of the ‘norm’ of the Hong Kong Chinese as a ‘minority model’ that is constructed within US society. Third is the way in which Hong Kong Chinese actively search for their subjectivity, asserting their distinct identity as Hong Kong people in relationship to being Chinese in the run-up to the transfer of Hong Kong to PRC sovereignty.¹²

POWER, DISCRIMINATION AND NORMALIZATION

While messages posted on HKnet display a longing for Hong Kong, they also reveal the forces that ‘normalize’ and ‘discipline’ users in their daily participation in social practices, centred on mixing in with society’s ‘melting pot’. The sincere desire for immersion in Western culture, as opposed to an instrumental mentality aimed at maximizing the benefits that accrue from living in the US, is expressed by a subscriber who explains how, ‘In [the] US, while we shouldn’t isolate ourselves from culture, we should take full advantage of our great opportunity of living in [the] US and expand[ing] our horizon’ (HKnet, 10 May 1989).

A friend of the participant who enjoyed socializing with her Chinese friends develops this theme further, stating:

I [also] take part in a lot of activities not restricted to Chinese only. During my five years in Canada and US, I make a lot of friends from various races, cultures and societies: Canadian, American (blacks and whites), Mexican, Venezuelan, English, German, Palestinian, Indian, Japanese, etc. Through my interaction with them, I learn a lot about their societies and cultures (such as strengths and weaknesses), their values, and so on. These experiences which I consider an integral part of our studying abroad are both enjoyable and educational to me. (HKnet, 10 May 1989)

Her story tells that it is feasible to tear down the boundaries of Chinese culture, and of the worthwhile experience for foreign students in the US of pursuing cultural, racial and societal exchanges and interactions with other parties. It also portrays something of the noble ideals presented by American movie and television productions.

However, this vision does not go unchallenged, as other subscribers argue that it is a rare and unlikely occurrence. Although the Hong Kong Chinese have attempted to ‘melt into’ US society, it is pointed out that they have been constantly denied access. As one immigrant living in a predominantly white neighbourhood explains:

It is well documented that the US is a ‘melting pot’. But the ‘melting pot’ means that immigrants – in fact blacks, and more precisely all non-whites – are
supposed to follow the ‘mainstream’ in thoughts and in practices . . . [M]any minorities . . . find this imposition arrogant. (In fact, on the same token, many developing countries and even European countries find America’s such ‘export’ of viewpoints – a form of imperialism to some people – unbearable. After all, if one talks about culture and civilization, America’s is one of the youngest.) Towards immigrants, America is not often open or tolerant. (HKnet, 11 May 1989)

Within this text, then, the term ‘melting pot’ is deconstructed to reveal that it indicates neither openness to non-white cultures nor tolerance of diversity or deviance. Therefore, the Hong Kong Chinese can be integrated only if they convert to mainstream American culture and surrender their own. For the contributor of this message, such a conundrum is tantamount to American imperialism. Others are equally open about the negative aspects of being Chinese in the US, with one baldly stating that:

I find things that I like in both the American and the Hong Kong ways. My reason for not wanting to stay [in the US] is discrimination . . . (HKnet, 11 May 1989)

It is important to note here how such contributors make it clear that their personal views are not held against the US, going out of their way to mention that they value both the Hong Kong and American way of life, at least in the political and economic realms.

However, the issue of discrimination is a subtle one. When it was formally proposed as a theme for discussion on HKnet in May 1989, a site was created where users could diagnose its pathologies and engage in a general critique of the rationality that is assumed in US society. The texts that were generated unveil the ‘panoptic forces’ of discrimination that exist throughout American society, from workplace to school and neighbourhood (Foucault, 1979). Even in California, where the Asian population is huge, there is a glass ceiling in the commercial world, as well as a stereotypic occupational segregation according to which Asians are classified as ‘techies’, as one contributor points out when he states:

For Asians who had been brought up in an eastern culture, even in California which has probably the least discrimination against Asians, it is not easy for immigrant Asians to move on to administrative positions from tech[nical] positions. (HKnet, 17 May 1989)

Another correspondent tells of the discrimination experienced by Hong Kong Chinese on campus:

One day, in the cafeteria, someone brought up a small incident in which a basketball was thrown [at] him from a fraternity house on his way to class. That triggered a lot of similar stories told by other Hkers. It seemed that everybody
who passed by that fraternity to class daily had similar experiences . . . We told [the authorities of the fraternity] that we didn’t want to see any more basketball or baseball thrown close to us. As were still talking, some US guy yelled out some Cantonese ‘four-letter-words’ [foul language] towards us from a dorm window . . . Next morning, the door of Hker’s dorm room had deeply scratched big words, ‘Chings Suck’, firmly on the door. The Hker was infuriated. He reported the incident to the dorm assistant, and he attempted to remove those words by scratching all the paint off the door . . . [In another incident], a ball of damped newspaper was thrown at a [HK] student. He then went with another student to report to the campus police. The police said nothing could be done. (HKnet, 18 May 1989)

Such narratives present a stark depiction of racial forces ranged against students as a form of collective hatred towards the Chinese, rather than as isolated and unorganized events. In another posting, the same student traces the root cause of this treatment to the extremely good academic performance of Chinese students. But his experience also reveals the more serious problem of a lack of justice in the network relationships of campus power, as the core authorities in the penal system react passively to racism. Such inaction amounts to a normalization of the social suppression of the Chinese, which becomes a day-to-day phenomenon of surveillance. As one contributor puts it:

As a student, I used to go on long motor trips with other Asian students. Apparent racial discrimination could be easily felt as we stopped at small towns to eat or to buy gasoline . . . On the streets, we were no longer surprised by contemptuous remarks from passing cars. (HKnet, 4 May 1989)

The subscribers also point out that the power or forces of discrimination invested in them are in fact also extended to all other Asians, and the possibility of departure is brought up. This is a sentiment encapsulated in one of the concluding remarks of this series of texts, which states:

I personally knew a friend who wanted to stay here so bad that he would do anything to stay here. After a while, he realized that he was looking for was the ‘carefree’ college lifestyle that he liked, not exactly the American culture . . . There is still discrimination that come[s] with working/living in the US. He finally decided to move back to HK. (HKnet, 14 May 1989)

In May 1989, the option of return to Hong Kong was still a practical possibility. Before the June suppression in China, few of those in the US expected that they would suffer more when they returned to Hong Kong than by staying in the US and living with discrimination. Many people even had high hopes that the PRC would give them freedom of speech, autonomy and liberty after it resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997.
REFUSING THE MINORITY MODEL

The discrimination experienced by the Hong Kong Chinese was also revealed by users of HKnet as a result of the minority model held by Americans of ‘Asians’ as ‘smart’ and ‘brilliant’ in academic achievement, especially in the sciences, beating not only other minorities but even the Whites, in addition to their being economically very well-off. Stereotypical as this view might be, the resistance engaged in by the Hong Kong Chinese is not without its contradictions. For example, while socially constructed and classified according to a model determined by the American people (Nakayama, 1988), the tendency to study vocational subjects was also cultural practice in Hong Kong under the pre-1997 colonial regime. Therefore, it is not surprising that some Hong Kong students could uncritically internalize such a norm. As one puts it in the HKnet debate:

There is an anecdote that I want to tell here. I was among a group of around 70HK students . . . Most of us were very competitive academically, and quite a few of us were rather smart students even [by] HK standard[s]. Naturally, we all did very well in school especially in science & engineering subjects. In physics, math. and chemistry courses, most of the A’s were got by HKers. B’s and C’s were got by white USers [Americans], and some Middle Eastern students got grades outside of that range. [Thus, t]he White USers did not like it. (HKnet, 17 May 1989)

Although such a story seems to be arrogant and humiliating for the American students, the contributor is not consciously trying to antagonize them. He is simply acting and speaking in a way that matches the minority model prescribed by colonial Hong Kong and reinforced by the American minority model. He continues:

[A HK student] says he feels less and less discrimination as he grows up. I think he sees that because he hangs around more with more educated people like himself as he grows up. Another reason may be that [he] himself becomes more and more ‘naturalized’. (HKnet, 17 May 1989)

The contributor thus describes two ways in which discrimination can be tackled. First, a student can conform more to the American minority model by engaging more with other elite and brilliant Asians. Alternatively, the student could simply be ‘naturalized’ to conform with mainstream American culture.

However, despite such pessimistic conclusions, subjection to the minority model does not close the possibilities for resistance by Hong Kong Chinese within local power networks. Instead, the way in which HKnet allows individuals to define their own identity as neither so-called ‘Asian’, or according to the non-White model, can be seen in contributions to a debate on the topic ‘Chinese genes are superior in CS or EE’, initiated in...
April 1989. A point made by some of the contributions to this debate is that many Hong Kong Chinese do not in fact work in the disciplines that Americans think that they should be in, and do not work just for money or to threaten Americans. As one correspondent explained:

I am enrolling in a program leading to a BS in Physics and Optics. In these days, there aren’t too many who are willing to study something like Physics or Chemistry, instead of going into fields like CS, EE or ME, etc, which can guarantee a much better salary or opportunities after graduation. Perhaps it is due to the influence of my high school (WYK), I am happy to be one of those who are enrolling in such a ‘romantic’ major. It’s a kind of romantic, isn’t it? . . . [Another student] is in his 3rd year studying EEE (EE and Economics) – another weird combination. So far so good; [t]he future is not so bright? . . . [you never know though]. (HKnet, 7 May 1989)

This student, then, offers an alternative model to counter what American culture compels him to do. He even proudly uses the word ‘romantic’ to challenge the claim that Asians are very instrumental and money-oriented. The example he gives of the EEE student also reinforces the possibility of deviance for Hong Kong students from the ‘normal’ standard of the Asian minority model.

Such a position is in fact quite specific to Hong Kong Chinese at this particular historical juncture. Given that they are unable to escape from the various political and cultural relations imposed on them as the colonized, they can at least distance themselves from the American-prescribed Asian minority model. However they do not refuse to recognize its existence. As one student remarks, regarding whether Hong Kong genes are more suitable for science subjects:

I don’t know [if] Chinese [genes] in general [are suitable for those science subjects only], but Hong Kong genes seem not [only suitable for science]. (HKnet, 5 May 1989)

Such a statement is interesting for the way in which the author does not defend other ‘Chinese in general’, but argues that specifically Hong Kong Chinese can behave in an alternative way. Similarly, another Hong Kong student refutes the superiority of Hong Kong Chinese in science-related subjects, and goes on to remark:

[The superiority] can only be seen in the real ‘Chinese’ population – Taiwan[ese] and mainland[ers]. (HKnet, 10 May 1989)

This HKnet subscriber, then, does not deny the possibility that Chinese from Taiwan and the PRC are particularly good at science subjects and take an instrumental view of making a living and securing a job in the US. What he wants to stress is that this is not the case for the Hong Kong Chinese. A
significant declaration of discontinuity from both the Asian minority model and the general Chinese population is thus made.

ARTICULATION OF HONG KONG IDENTITY

This segregation of Hong Kong Chinese from other Chinese or 'Chineseness', has important implications for the struggle against the privileges of knowledge and discourse, during which the self is tied back to one’s identity (Foucault, 1982). What users of the HKnet are doing through practice, is to actively constitute themselves with a bona fide identity of 'Hong Kong Chinese' that is not historically and politically admissible in either the dominant Chinese or American discourses.

Chinese society in Hong Kong was under British colonial rule for over 150 years, and evolved as part of a unique capitalist international financial centre at the southern apex of China. Hong Kong identity is thus the product of a dynamic interaction between Western and Chinese culture, as well as between historical moments such as the cession of the territory to Britain in the Treaty of Nanjing 1842, and the Sino–British negotiations which sealed the 1984 agreement for its transfer to the PRC. Thus, it is not surprising that a legitimate identity for the Hong Kong Chinese can be found in neither Chinese nor Western culture. Given that the position of Hong Kong is always on the margin – at least politically – Hong Kong Chinese in Chinese communities are subsumed under the general category of ‘Chinese’, while in the US they are regarded as ‘Asians’. Within this context, what the Hong Kong Chinese who use HKnet accomplish is the constitution of an alternative 'subjectivity' by modifying the ‘normalized’ rules of discourse for daily life in the US. What their email exchanges show is that they want the identity of ‘Hongkonger’ or ‘Hongkongese’ to be recognized as legitimate, in distinction from the label ‘Chinese’ (HKnet, 11 and 14 May 1989). This is the message that is delivered both before and even after the 1997 transfer of sovereignty.

This process could be described as one of ‘avoidance of the equivalent, and the same or the like’ (Deleuze, 1983: 49). For example, such a view is underlined when one participant comments:

[When I introduce myself to Americans,] I usually say, ‘I’m from Hong Kong’, or ‘I’m a Chinese from Hong Kong’. (HKnet, 15 May 1989)

This Hong Kong Chinese would never say that he is ‘Chinese’. Such a distinction, from a ‘Hongkongese’ perspective, is vital in the way that it indicates separation from the political and economic domains of ‘China’. It is these differences that inculcate a distinct sense of identity in the Hong Kong Chinese. The only thing that they cannot completely separate from ‘Chinese’, and forces them to align with Chinese identity, is their ethnicity. However, this is not the case in the political dimension.
Politically, in the late 1980s, most of the ethnic Chinese population of Hong Kong hesitated to be associated with ‘Chinese from China’, and social indicators for the territory taken in 1990 show that more than 50 percent of Hong Kong Chinese distrusted the PRC (Lau, 1992; Lau, Kuan and Wan, 1991). This stemmed from the historical legacy of the Cultural Revolution and fears that the authoritarian political regime in the PRC would be replicated in Hong Kong after 1997. Thus, the people of Hong Kong have strongly defended the principle of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ established by the 1984 Sino–British Joint Declaration, to ensure their own autonomy and perpetuate their own identity (see Scott, 1989). While the most sensitive issues of politics and press freedom are often classified as matters related to ‘One Country’ rather than ‘Two Systems’, the people of Hong Kong have shown a remarkable ability to maintain a subtle disjunction of identity between themselves and the PRC, which has seldom been accepted by other Chinese communities, let alone the PRC government. Such a disjuncture is well illustrated by social indicators relating to identity over the years. According to surveys conducted in 1988, 63.6 percent of Hong Kong Chinese identified themselves as ‘Hongkongese’. When the new category of ‘Hongkongese and Chinese’ was introduced into the surveys in 1990, only 13.8 percent of respondents identified with it, while 56.6 percent continued to see themselves as ‘Hongkongese’ (Lau, 1992: 138).

Such a pattern of identification is strongly reflected in HKnet correspondence. One organizer is clear on the issue when he states, ‘I am Chinese, not People’s Republic’ (HKnet, 10 May 1989). Another Hong Kong Chinese contributor traces the differences between ‘Hongkongese’ and Chinese to the different world views engendered by the ideologies of capitalism and communism, and links these identities with political and economic differences, when he states:

The differences [between China and Hong Kong] are monetary rewards and freedom! In HK by working hard you can earn more to fulfill your materialistic temptations, that’s hardly true in China. You enjoy more freedom in HK when compared to China . . . (HKnet, 10 May 1989)

The significance of such exchanges lies in the way that users of HKnet are able to use this technology to refuse the dominant discourses of identity that emanate from China, Hong Kong and the US, within which their identification takes place. HKnet is thus an example of how an NMT can become a unique site within which a minority group can articulate its own subjectivity. The form of emancipation that this involves is what Foucault alludes to when he contends that the problem of our days is not trying to free us both from the state and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us from the state and from the type of individualization linked to the state. Just as he proposes to promote new forms of subjectivity through refusing the
kind of individuality which has been imposed for several centuries (Foucault, 1982), so the users of HKnet refuse the models of identity imposed by the networks of power within which they find themselves in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

CONCLUSION: CHINESE, THE INTERNET AND A POSTSTRUCTURALIST PERSPECTIVE

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the Gramscian perspective of deconstructing text signification based on empirical analysis can never provide a conclusive answer to the question of whether any NMT liberates the cybercommunity or the participant. However, it has been argued previously that a Foucauldian perspective can provide answers by starting from the acceptance that power is everywhere and is indispensable in any social construct. The above analysis of correspondence on HKnet has developed such a view by showing how it became a unique site where Hong Kong Chinese could articulate their subjectivity within the complex grid of disciplinary, normalizing and panoptic powers formed during the political transition of Hong Kong (Foucault, 1979). The Foucauldian turn of the analysis is evident in the way that the HKnet texts are not taken as given, but as manifestations of social practices within a specific political problematic.

Following from this, the argument can be proposed that social practices conducted through NMTs become means by which members of the ‘normalized’ minority (here, Hong Kong Chinese), can strategically recapture the essence of their own identity within the small site, staging acts of resistance against the power/knowledge network that exists at a specific historical conjuncture. While it is not feasible to try to erase power or to oppose the knowledge/power relationship in which social actors produce and participate, the emancipatory potential of the internet can be questioned by looking at what marginal groups actually do and how they articulate their own view, identity, subjectivity and their own emancipation project through practice online.

Whether groups actually succeed in attaining specific goals is not the main concern from the Foucauldian perspective. It is more important to reveal how the practices of the minority group constitute a form of resistance to the pressures of normalization. The argument above has illustrated this by demonstrating how the online activities of the Hong Kong Chinese in the US constitute a form of resistance to the twin pressures of national (Chinese) domination in the run-up to the 1997 transition, and the everyday domination exerted by American society for those who choose to escape PRC sovereignty.

However, it is worth stressing that very different conclusions might be drawn about the emancipatory potential of NMTs following the
commercialization of the internet that took place in the late 1990s. As the
decline of HKnet in the late 1990s demonstrates, newly formed websites,
non-publicized and non-commercialized sites find it hard to survive and
retain users when faced by the commodification and commercial acquisition
of political and cultural practices by capital-rich corporations in cyberspace.
Given the challenges to the dominant discourses of identity politics posed
by a group such as HKnet, as well as the strong presence of China in the
interplay of international politics and business, the kind of political practice
that was possible in the late 1980s and early 1990s may now be significantly
diluted, or even cease to exist under the pressure of external political–
economic constraints on websites. It would certainly be hard to argue that
HKnet would be able to engage in the kind of resistance described above if
it were to be recreated in the current global context. However, despite this
pessimistic note, although there is no proof that HKnet was successful in
resisting the identity politics of the Hong Kong transition, it can be said to
provide an example of how an NMT under certain historical conditions was
able to play a role in allowing the injection of the subjectivity of the Hong
Kong Chinese into their own history.

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Notes
1 The email archive was provided by the co-ordinator of HKnet. The archive analysed
covers two months. The reason for studying only the first volume is that: (1) this
period covers a discussion on HK Chinese identity and on racial discrimination of
HK Chinese in the US and Canada, which fit my topic of study; (2) after these two
months, the focus of discussion was mostly on the 4 June student movement in
China in 1989, which is not the focus of this paper.
2 Based on what was searchable on the internet, at that time, there were only the
HKnet, ahkcus.org, and soc.culture.hk.
3 The author was also a member of HKnet and he interviewed Bryan So, the
convenor of HKnet via email, on 14 and 15 February 1995.
4 Since 1990, over 5000 Hong Kong student visas for study in the US have been
offered annually. A ‘safety net’ scheme was also announced in 1990. It allowed Hong
Kong employees working in American firms in the US to obtain permanent
residence. The number of applications for Canadian immigration also culminated in
1990 at 21,934.
5 Interview with Bryan So, convenor of HKnet on 14 and 15 February 1995.
6 During this period, many participants were from mainland China in addition to
Hong Kong Chinese.
7 The organizers explained that they did not expect HKnet to be a forum for political
discussion only. Issues such as ‘long live democracy’ ceased to appear on the subject
line of the news discussion group soon after the movement was crushed in 1989.
Inactive subscribers are those who used to be subscribers to HKnet and who demanded that their names be temporarily or permanently deleted from the mailing list.

Interview with Bryan So, 14 and 15 February 1995.

Members (or subscribers) of HKnet come from different fields, from technological expertise to liberal art scholars (93 worked in the computer field, 9 in sociology, 13 in economics and 16 in physics).

‘Hongkongers’ refers to those Chinese who come from Hong Kong.

The assertion of identity by Hong Kong Chinese as distinguished from people from China is a much more complicated issue than I would encompass in this paper. This identity is in a dynamic state of flux with subsequent political changes in China and Hong Kong, including China’s military crackdown on the democracy movement in 1989, the ever-increasing anti-Communist China syndrome in Hong Kong, and the conflict between China and Britain over the future arrangement for Hong Kong in the 1990s. HKnet might not be a comprehensive site for studying all these political implications, as the discussion on political matters died down after 1989.

References


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