

# From "Silent Minority" to Collective Protests in Real Life: Tension, Resistance and Online Identity Discourse of Overseas Chinese

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## Abstract

This study examines how overseas Chinese in the U.S used their online narratives to articulate their individual identities, and to form a shared group identity. What is more, during April 2008, rallies and protests were organized by these online discussion groups. The analysis of participants' narratives demonstrates the emancipatory potential of the Internet, that is, online discussion helps members of a marginalized group form a united identity to resist existing power, and to facilitate their collective actions in the real world.

The narrative analysis also shows that although individuals are empowered by the online discussions, and are privileged to question any social or political issue, their choices of standing point are shaped by their social positions and cultural background. The constraining factors (socioeconomic position, cultural background, reality tensions, etc.), through online discourse, are gradually transformed into the common ground of overseas Chinese's online group identity.

**Keywords:** Online discussion, Identity narratives, Overseas Chinese

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Globalization, advanced transportation and telecommunication technology have profoundly changed people's conceptions of spatial and national boundaries. The current era is characterized by a rapid growth in population mobility (Friedman 2005). As more and more people are traveling and migrating around the world, intercultural communication and adaptation increasingly become a part of many people's daily lives (Croucher 2004). Mitra contends the revolutionary changes in special mobility will cause "a set of unique possibilities, conditions and tensions in the history of civilization" (2005:371). Among these emerging global trends, one important and complicated phenomenon is the identity confusion and reconstruction experienced by lots of people whose identities are detached from stable special and social positions (Korne, Byram, & Fleming 2007).

The identity dilemma is especially apparent for overseas Chinese moving out from the People's Republic of China to some Western countries. Cheung (2004) observes that people are very likely to feel confused and frustrated when their identities are disharmonious with their social and cultural environment. Historical, ideological and social structural factors have left a huge gulf between Western countries and the People's Republic of China. As individuals, it may be easier for overseas Chinese to stride over the geographical distance, but it is quite another story for them to overcome cultural and ideological barriers. Several studies have reported that overseas Chinese' experiences of both cultural and ideological clashes in Western countries sometimes engendered severe feelings of identity tension and confusion (Orbe 2004; Shi 2005).

Numerous studies have examined the role of media use in the global intercultural communication process and how it affects immigrants' adaptation to host cultures (Campbell & Zeng 2006; Chen 2005; Lum 1991; Yang, Wu, Zhu, & Southwell 2004). Researchers found that the Internet has been used for connecting with home culture, families and friends (Yang et al. 2004). However, given the multimedia and personalized context of the Internet, limiting the discussion of immigrants' Internet use to adaptations or home-contact will lead to the neglect of some important dimensions such as new power relationships emerging from the communication process. Mitra also argues that although uploading information online or setting up a website does not guarantee attention to the information, but the

"potential of being heard" empowers the "moment of creating the utterance, and this perspective is particularly important for marginal groups" (2005:379).

For an overseas Chinese who has to face a confused and fragmented identity, the question of identity reconstruction may be a substantial theme in his/ her daily life (Mitra 2005). Therefore, the cybernetic space, which potentially promises everyone a chance of self-expression, might be used by overseas Chinese, who are traditionally marginalized in the Western context, to meet others with similar problems, and to rebuild their identities in the new context. As Burt (1992) observed, individuals' connections are often transformed into certain forms of power, and therefore potentially provide resources for resistance. For instance, after analyzing the online discourse of an overseas Chinese website, Fung (2002) notes that users of the website expressed and constructed a distinct group identity through their online discussion, and used their discourse as a forum to resist outside power and political tensions.

The implications of the Internet for power relationship have intrigued enduring debates (Berger 2007; Gajjala 2002; Mitra 2005; Spears et al. 2002). Overseas Chinese' online narratives about a special social event which brought considerable threat to their identity formed valuable context for this study to examine how minority groups' Internet use could change their resistant patterns.

The phrase "overseas Chinese" is preferred over "Chinese immigrants" in this study. Because the concept of overseas Chinese includes students or business people who just temporarily stay in host countries, and they contributed a substantial part of online discussions. This study pays special attention to an important, but often neglected aspect of overseas Chinese' online discussion, namely, the influence of Confucian values on individuals' perceptions of relationships. How do Confucian values influence overseas Chinese's online group identity and their virtual relationship? What are the special features of overseas Chinese's online group identity? In the context of great tension, how does online group identity influence overseas Chinese's online discussion and their resistance of power in real life? In the following sections, this study will first introduce the method of inquiry and the context in which the study is placed; the concept of identity and its features are also discussed. Further, overseas Chinese' online discourses are analyzed in the context of history, the current social environment, and the Confucian culture. Previous questions are explored, and findings and implications are also presented.

### ***Methodology: Narrative Inquiry***

#### *Narrative Inquiry*

Narrative is people's description of their experiences, memories, and "connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (Chase 2000:656). In fact, everyone is a narrator in one time or another. People create narratives to make sense of their lives (Atkinson 2003). In Liu and Laszlo's words: "Narrative connects individuals to a collective through symbol, knowledge, and meaning" (2007:87). Through the action of narrating a story, narrators construct their experiences in a way that makes sense to themselves. The self is constructed, questioned and demonstrated through the process of telling a story.

Narrative inquiry is a widely employed qualitative research method. Narrative inquiry studies "how people tell and understand stories, including performances of their own history or mythology, enlightens us about the process of how a group creates a social reality" (Liu & Laszlo 2007:87). One of the most important values of narrative inquiry is that it allows studies to incorporate the narrators' voices and views, emotions, thoughts and understandings (Chase 2000). Narrative inquiry helps the researcher see the world through the eyes of narrators. Since narratives are constrained by the narrators' cultural, social and historical positions, by focusing on certain narratives, the researcher could attend to a particular time, event, and individual. What is more, as has been noted by Atkinson: "the primary idea behind this constitutive function is for the narrative to relate itself toward a culture's social world in terms of values, traditions, beliefs, institutions, and language" (2003:171). Aforementioned properties of narrative inquiry qualify it as an ideal method to study the narrators' identities. This is because identity is also closely related to culture, values and social norms, and is one form of dialogue. Through retrieved experiences, structured thoughts about events and the storytelling process, the narrators could consciously perform and articulate their identities.

Narrative inquiry also allows the narrators to demonstrate their resistance against power. Best and Kellner, for example, argue that: "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" (1991:51). Atkinson notes that on the one hand, narratives may be used to perpetuate ideologies that are supported by the narrators; on the other hand, the narrators, especially narrators from marginalized groups, may also use narratives "to oppose or challenge the status quo or dominant ideology" (2003:172). Atkinson's view is consistent with Mendoza et al.'s discussion about one aspect of identity: "identity is double-sided and can, in one instance, function as a dominant structure and then in another, without changing its communicative form, potentially operate as a resistive signification" (2002:320). Therefore, a study of how narrators use their narratives to construct their "double-sided" identity, helps researchers to attend to the political functions of identity, and reveals how identity is influenced by values and powers.

Mitra suggests that for researchers who are interested in conducting online narrative analysis, one challenge is to find a proper context and then decide "what extent of hyper-connectedness will be explored" (2005:381). Therefore, it is essential to select an appropriate website for this study. In the following section, a carefully selected website will be introduced.

### *Virtual Home of Overseas Chinese: The Mitbbs Website*

Mitbbs ([www.mitbbs.com](http://www.mitbbs.com)) is a popular websites among thousands of Chinese students and professionals throughout the U.S. (Yuan 2004). The website started in 1998 as an online billboard where Chinese students posted questions about how to write computer programs. Now, it has developed into a website with 400 forums (the number is still increasing) and more than 300,000 registered users. On average, there are about 10 thousand visitors visiting the website daily. Chinese is the main language used on the website. Since Mitbbs cannot be reached from the mainland of China (due to the Internet filtration policy of the Chinese government), basically only overseas Chinese are able to and interested in visiting the website. The 400 forums provide space for overseas Chinese to discuss and consult each other with all kinds of problems. Discussion topics ranging from sports, music, tips about daily life, academic discussions, cultural clashes, racial relationship issues and political discussions

As a registered user of Mitbbs, the author has participated in and observed many intense debates and discussions over the past two years, and has become familiar with the discussion patterns on the website. Forums of Mitbbs usually have very diverse topics. However, during April 2008, a central discussion theme emerged from many of the forums. This theme focused on the 2008 Olympic global torch relays and the protests and rallies that accompanied this tour. This controversial event has complicated historical and political causes, and it challenged the image and interests of China in many ways. Overseas Chinese' online discussion about this event not only demonstrated their particular views of the historic event, but also provided access to understand how online group identities are constructed under tensions and power relationships. More importantly, since forums on Mitbbs later were used to organize overseas Chinese's rallies in many cities in the U.S., these narratives provided an important context to examine how the online group identity exerted the power of resistance, not only in virtual space but also in the real world.

Online discussions about this event during April 2008 were found and downloaded from Mitbbs. Narrative inquiry was used to analyze these discourses. Before the discussion of overseas Chinese's online discourses, it is necessary to first clarify several important concepts and their relationships.

### ***Individual Identity and Social Identity: A Clarification of Concepts***

Be it in virtual or real life, individuals always possess certain understandings of themselves. This understanding is referred to as individuals' identity (Taylor & Spencer 2004). It has been widely agreed that this understanding of self could influence an individual's motivations, attitudes and behaviors (Tajfel 1979). However, the question of whether an individual's identity is a stable unit or a dialogue has caused fervent debates. To answer this question, it is necessary to acknowledge the difference between individual identity and individual's social identity. A detailed discussion will be carried out in the following paragraphs.

*Identity: A dialogue or a construction?*

Social science tends to mirror the feature of certain historical and social contexts (Nerone 1995). In the early stages of industrialization, the concept of individual identity was defined according to certain space, time, and other demographic categories (Taylor & Spencer 2004). In the current era, however, as different forms of intercultural and international communication increasingly become common phenomena, some scholars began to bemoan the "identity crisis" experienced by a large group of people (Hall, Held, & McGrew 1992). The "identity crisis" is characterized by the tendency that many individuals' identities are detaching from a stable status and are increasingly becoming fragmented, ambiguous, and are constantly changing (Jung & Lee 2004). Taylor and Spencer contend that "it could indeed be argued that to study identity is to recognize the troubled nature of the individual" (2004:1).

Scholars sharing this view tend to describe individuals' identity as a constantly negotiation process (Hall, Held, & McGrew 1992; Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau 2003; Jung & Lee 2004; Taylor & Spencer 2004). The process is considered as a complex and dynamic interaction, a dialogue between the self and the ever changing society and others (Mead 1934). Hecht, Jackson and Ribeau define the concept of individual identity as "inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages and values are exchanged" (2003:230). Current discussion of individual identity moves the concept from a fixed and static status into an ever-changing and open-ended process, and therefore better represents the living condition of modern individuals. The discussion of individual identity as a dialogue allows researchers to trace the constant influence coming from the individual's daily interactions with society, others, and the mediated environment (Cheung 2004).

However, over exaggerating the dialogue feature of individual identity may lead to the illusion that individual identity has no stable characteristic. As Mendoza et al. noted: "the macro social, historical and political contexts of identity construction are still missing" (2002:313). Martin and Nakayama (2000) also argue that identity has its own political and power functions, and it is historically and politically situated. In other words, although everyday interaction powerfully influences an individual's identity, it is not the sole force that shapes identity.

Hogg and Abrams (1988) suggest that individuals are born into certain social identities, and an individual's membership of a particular social group considerably affects his or her cognitive, affective and behavioral activities. Social identity is an individual's knowledge of which group he or she belongs to. A social group is formed by individuals having similar social identity (Stets & Burke 1998).

Traditionally, a social group is defined as a collection of individuals who personally interact with other group members, and work together to accomplish shared goals (Hogg 1992). Virtual groups differ from traditional groups in many ways (more detailed discussion, see Katelyn, McKenna & Green 2002). Members of virtual groups may know nothing about other members' real life identities, social positions and, quite often, never meet each other physically. However, individuals can still feel attached to other members of virtual groups (Mittra 2005), and studies have documented the influence of virtual group membership on individuals (Diehl & Prins 2008; Niezen 2005).

Individuals' social identities in real life can influence their motivations to join a virtual group. According to Katelyn et al. (2002), one of the most influential reasons that motivate members of marginalized groups to participate in virtual group interaction is that they feel their identity in real life is culturally devalued or is in some type of disadvantaged situation. Interactions with other individuals with similar problems help them to vent their distress and frustrations. In this type of situation, individual's online interaction may not only serve for information or entertaining purposes, but may also provide social supporting function.

Whitworth, Gallupe and McQueen (2000) note that the formation of a united group identity is one of the important tasks of online group interactions and has crucial value for sustaining an online group over a long period of time. Dutton and Dukerich (1991) also observed that a distinct and united group identity can affect group members' behaviors and interaction patterns. It is interesting, therefore, to explore what factors could affect how well members identify with a virtual group, and how online group identity affects members' individual identity and social identity.

The concepts of individual identity and social identity complement each other. The combination of the two concepts can provide a more comprehensive view of identity. This view attends to both longtime or macro level factors such as social and cultural context, and micro level factors such as everyday social

interactions, individual experiences and special social events. An individual's identity and social identity also influence one another. Riva and Galimberti (1998) note that since people's perceived realities comes from their social interaction, an individual's identity is deeply affected by his/her specific social interaction network. In other words, an individual's social identity affects the way the individual perceives him/ herself (individual identity). Meanwhile, an individual's identity may influence the individual's decision of whether to interact with certain social groups (Stets & Burke 1998).

The view of identity as having both stable and changing aspects sheds valuable insights to the understanding of individual's online activities: 1) a social identity of a group is a historical and social construction. In other words, being a member of a group has different meanings for individuals from different backgrounds; 2) interactions with social groups exert influence over an individual's identity, and this influence is likely reflected in individuals' expression of their identities; and 3) the shared social identity among a group of individuals is the basis for online group interaction.

After clarifying the distinction between individual's identity and social identity, to examine how these concepts influence overseas Chinese, it is necessary to put the abstract discussion into context. In the following sections, the historical, social and cultural position of overseas Chinese will be presented in detail.

### *Online Identity Dialogue: The Dialogue in Context*

The view that identity is a historically and politically specific construction highlights an often neglected fact: being a member of a certain group does not mean the same thing across time and situations. Rather, at the macro level, cultural norms, social relationships, and power structures could profoundly affect how individuals view themselves. At the micro level, everyday interaction and discourse also affect individuals' identity formation (Mendoza, Hulualani, & Drzewiecka 2002). For example, being an overseas Chinese now is different from being an overseas Chinese half a century ago (Ma 2003).

In light of the previous discussion, before carrying out the analysis of the overseas Chinese's online identity narratives, it is necessary to first acknowledge the historical and social position of the current overseas Chinese. To facilitate the analysis, the social context is limited within the U.S. It has been estimated that there are about 5 million Chinese living in non-Asian countries, and more than one-third of overseas Chinese live in the U.S (Ma 2003). Therefore, the condition of Chinese living in the U.S. could relatively represent the larger picture.

Around the 1850s, the earliest overseas Chinese move to the U.S. as miners or laborers. Their socioeconomic positions, and the discriminatory environment of that time made blood and ethnic bonds the most available and important relationships for them. Overseas Chinese of this period highly identified with their local community, following "the norms and practices they have brought from their homeland" (Lum 1991:91). They were fully aware that they were sojourners or "outsiders and foreigners" in the host country (Fan 2003:283), and "they cluster around remembered or imagined ethnic homes, and form racial/ethnic communities, so as to re-root their floating lives" (Shi 2005:4). Their identities were marked by diaspora and insulation experiences.

Currently, the majority (about 76.7%) of overseas Chinese living in the U.S. has moved into American since the 1980s (Fan 2003:262). Some of them immigrated into the U.S for economic or political reasons and some of them temporarily stayed in the U. S. for business or academic purposes (Ma 2003). When compared to earlier overseas Chinese, post 1980s overseas Chinese generally have higher educational levels, more diverse occupations, and higher average household incomes (Lum 1991). The civil rights movement in the U.S. also changed the social environment. With enhanced social capital and resources, overseas Chinese increasingly demonstrated more diverse adaptation patterns and identity formations (Ma 2003; Yang, Wu, Zhu, & Southwell 2004).

However, overseas Chinese in general still lack social influence and are subject to "two types of racial dimensions" (Fan 2003:285). The first type of racial dimension is rooted in the U.S. long-standing White dominant culture. The overseas Chinese, as well as other ethnic minorities, faces many social and economical disadvantages (McLaughlin 1997). In post-9/11 America, many immigrants and foreign workers found themselves living in hostile or precarious situations (Mitra 2005). For instance, Boomgaarden (2006) found the media increasingly used threaten frames to cover immigration issues, and

found that this type of news could stir mainstream audiences' anti-immigration sentiments. The current adverse economic condition further exacerbated the anti-immigration trend.

The second type of racial domination is very sensitive to the U.S-China relationship. The relationship between China and the U.S. is always complicated and up-and-down. Sometimes Chinese from the mainland of China are even subject to suspicion (Fan 2003). For example, Fan notes that: "regardless of how 'American' Chinese Americans have become, these external developments continue to constrain their opportunities in politics, technology, management and other fields" (2003:285). The following narrative clearly reveals the frustrating situation experienced by an overseas Chinese.

Don't naively believe that with a green card you will become an American . . . When the white society comes up against any serious problems, the first group that will be discriminated and excluded is us, the foreigners . . . No matter how much tax we have paid and how many scientific achievements we have contributed to this country, we are still foreigners here. Just like no matter how many cheap goods China have sent to the Western world, they still deem it as an enemy . . . (Mitbbs, Apr 21, 21:11:28, 2008)

Unlike narratives expressed in daily conversation, online narratives tend to be better structured, guided by certain logic and are easy to follow. This narrative demonstrated the above mentioned two-types of racial-domination: the longstanding White dominant culture in the U.S., and the complicated relationship between U.S and China. A vivid picture of the social context in which many overseas Chinese live is revealed through this narrative. This narrative starts from personal experience, namely, even by *paying tax*, and getting *green card*, the narrator still felt insecure about his/her living situation. Personal experiences were then related to group experience as "*foreigners*", and then were linked to more general situation of how overseas Chinese feel China has been treated. The link between personal experience and a nation's condition is: hard working and contribute greatly but underappreciated by others. Oversea Chinese, as a minority group, is characterized by hard working and respects social and normative laws and routines. However, as marginalized "silent minorities", they may generally feel unnoticed. China faces similar situation. Although China contributes cheap goods to the global community, its effort has rarely been recognized by the Western world. Further, in dire economic conditions, the pressure from anti-immigration views may deteriorate the living condition of overseas Chinese. As the narrator noted, when the society faces serious problem, he or she felt being blamed because of his or her identity. This narrative fully demonstrates how two types of racial dominations are interrelated, and constrain overseas Chinese to comfortably identify with the mainstream American culture.

What is more, as has been noted by Fitzgerald, since we are now living in a highly mediated environment "definitions of self are today the work of mediated experiences as well as culturally and socially constructed beliefs and values" (1993:5). Jung and Lee (2004) also suggest that media play a crucial role in the identity construction of immigrants. For overseas Chinese, they are underrepresented in the media, and their images are mixed with other Asian minorities (Zinzius 2005). Terminologies like *model minority*, *silent minority* have been used to represent the overseas Chinese group. These terminologies suggest that overseas Chinese always work hard and have undemanding personalities, and since they are quiet and mild, they also "not functioned to change society or give it new direction" (Zinzius 2005:230). However, as Kronberger and Wolfgang insightfully noted: "A social representation about an object tells more about a group's identity than about the nature of this object" (2007:177). In other words, the image of overseas Chinese in the American media is the projection of the misunderstanding between cultures and may serve the hegemonic aims of mainstream ideologies. Zinzius suggests that the Chinese traditional values of hard working and family-first have been framed as a cultural myth. On the one hand it helps to support the "American Dream, White American Style" (2005:232); on the other hand, it has created competition among minorities, and sometimes even engendered jealousies or hostilities from other racial groups. This culture myth denies the pluralistic nature of the Chinese group, and raises people's expectation of the performance of overseas Chinese (Shi 2005).

In short, the invisible barrels and tensions leave huge distance between overseas Chinese and the mainstream American culture. Overseas Chinese tend to observe the American elites and dominant ideologies from a critical angle. Overseas Chinese use their online discussion to articulate their opinions, to question the hegemony of American culture. For example, the following narrative reveals an overseas Chinese's concern about democracy and whether it is good for China:

The situation of China is very complicated . . . we should have faith: we will have democracy one day. But we should be very careful when we democratize China. This is because democracy roots in the Western culture and individualism . . . some other thing and purposes can come together with democracy. The current situation of Iraq is a very good lesson. . . And we should never forget one thing. We want democracy not because a democratic China can please any foreign countries; but we want to use democracy to build up a stronger China . . . (Mitbbs, May 3, 10:42:27, 2008)

This quote was constructed with conflicting views towards "*democracy*", a mainstream ideology which has been assumed to be the ideal social form for the U.S and for the rest of the world. On the one hand the narrator acknowledged that China should also realize demoralization. On the other hand, juxtaposed to the acceptance of democracy, he or she remained to be critical to how and why China proceed towards democracy. The narrator reflected on what he or she wants to support and what he or she wants to resist. Through this reflection and articulation process, he or she consciously structures, restructures and articulates his or her identity: the identity that he or she chooses for him/herself. By posting this reflection, the narrator's self-inquiry may also question the identity of everyone who read this thread. In this way, online forums offer participants who are separated by physical distance a chance to reconnect with others that share a common ground, and to criticize authorities or individuals that pose a threat to their identities. Such criticized targets including the governments, organizations, media and even other overseas Chinese whose actions were deemed questionable. For example, one discussant questioned perceived media bias:

When I saw the disabled girl Jingjin used her fragile body to protect the torch in Paris, I cried voicelessly. But what makes me so angry is that a Western TV show host, looking at that scene, was crowing over and laughing! What is more, when we went to the street to demonstrate our support for the Olympic Games, the CNN host Jack Cafferty made such comments: "they are basically the same bunch of goons and thugs they've been for the last 50 years." Who gives him the right to disparage us? Where are the so called objective and justice? What are the professional values of these Western media? For me, and I believe for all of my brothers and sisters, such actions are cruel... (Mitbbs, Apr 23, 03:13:17, 2008)

This narrative evolves around the narrators' strong reaction towards two talk shows aired by American mainstream media. The narrator was enraged by the indifference and belittlement that the media demonstrated towards overseas Chinese's rallies. This narrative was filled with strong emotions, and the pronouns gradually shift from "*me*" to "*we*", and inviting the audiences (other members of Mitbbs) to experience the mediated events from the viewpoint of the narrator. This is a process that the narrator, by questioning social realities that he or she felt uncomfortable with, demonstrated his or her resistance. As noted by Foucault, individuals are privileged to question any abuse of power. Individuals' resistance, thereby, "are struggles that question the status of the individual...they attack everything that separates the individual, breaks his link with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way...they are struggles against the government of individualization" (2000:330).

As mentioned earlier, narrators not only challenged authorities in their online discussions. Some participants also criticized other Chinese whose actions did not seem to be advisable. For example, one discussant posted the following thread:

I feel some overseas Chinese are still too immature. Some young men and women do not know how to reasonably respond to others' criticism. Just being angry or being radical cannot solve any problem. When CNN commentator insulted our rally, should we just throw back even more malicious words? That will just prove he was right. As Chinese, our tradition culture tells us to be humble and elegant (*ruyaqianxu*); as overseas Chinese, our new environment teaches us to be open and to respect differences. If they cannot do it right, let us show them... (Mitbbs, Apr 29, 19:31:55, 2008)

Different opinions and voices were balancing each other out on the online forum, and provided other members multiple angles to reflect on their identities and actions. This quote was written in a more calm and rational pattern when compared with the former narrative. As a reflection of some overseas Chinese's

over-passionate reaction, the narrator questioned the effectiveness of actions of "*some young men and women*". The narrator suggested overseas Chinese should learn from both of the Chinese "*traditional culture*" and the Western culture, and should show the world more admirable image of overseas Chinese. The narrator's standing point is as a member of the online group, and he or she encouraged other members to behave better than "*they*" (Western media in this context). However, identifying with the group did not blind the narrator. In online forums, narrators constantly question realities that they feel uncomfortable with, and their own group is also a subject of inquiry.

The Internet not only makes an alternative communication channel available to marginalized groups, but it also pools individual's thoughts and voices together and allows others to read and to respond. As the discussions and debates continued online, individual narratives may be de-individualized, and gradually evolve into group narratives. More and more consensus or common ground is forged among the participants. Some may feel like "*brothers and sisters*" as expressed in the above narrative. Members of the virtual group build relationships with each other, and eventually take action together in real life.

### ***Online Group Identity: From Reality Tensions to Online Resistance***

The online discussion forums provide members of marginalized group channels to exchange their views and opinions. Some researchers suggest the anonymous environment of the Internet is the key element that allows people to communicate freely online (Kiesler & Sproull 1992). However, this view overlooks the fact that both of the adaptation of a communication technology and the communication process helps in "solving certain pre-existing, real, or perceived problems relating to information or human interaction" (Lum 1996:4). Spears et al. notes that the online environment filters out some "social cues", however, "cues to social category membership often seep through . . . and make members of certain groups more aware of their shared group identity and the group identity of others" (2002:557). Gajjala (2002) also contends that exclusion is an essential property derived from the formation of the online discussion groups. Certain ideologies, preferences and tensions tend to drive groups of people together to form a collective group. For overseas Chinese who discuss their problems on the Mitbbs, two of their commonalities are ethnic origin and sympathetic feelings that come from similar real life experiences.

Nostalgic discussion is one of the constant themes on many diaspora websites (Fung 2002), and Mitbbs is not an exception. The sense of longing for home is transferred into a passion and love for the homeland and an anxiety for the image and interests of China. For example, a participant posted the following passionate comments after returning from a rally:

"Why there is always tear in my eyes . . . because my love for the country is so deep . . ."  
 These words come from the poster which I brought to join the May 4<sup>th</sup> rally in New York.  
 These words have stayed in my heart since the March 14<sup>th</sup> Tibet event . . . I brought this poster to join the rally is because I want to share these words with every overseas Chinese . . .  
 . There is tear in our eyes, not because we are frail or weak, but because there is love in our hearts . . . (Mitbbs, May 6, 18:12:18, 2008)

In this narrative, the narrator expressed a deep feeling of nostalgia and worry for China. As Fraser (2004) noted, audiences are important components of any narratives. In the online community, the narrator's imagined audiences are thousands of overseas Chinese who can easily share the feelings of the narrator. In the above narrative, the narrator mentioned "*tear*" twice, but was not worried that others will interpret "*tear*" as "*frail or weak*" because the narrator believed the shared "*love*" for their home country has connected audiences and the narrator. By sharing their deep and common feelings, individuals may feel virtually connected.

What is worth noting is that such passion does not idealize the government that officially stands for the country. On the contrary, the Communist party and the central government often become the target of criticism. However, the overseas Chinese's criticisms of the party and the Chinese central government rarely resonate with Westernized criticisms. The standing points of their discussion can be analogized with the positions of exiled citizens. Although they possess the autonomy to dispute any bonds, they still identify with the Chinese culture and love their home country. Overseas Chinese' criticism is not from an outsider's point-of-view, while their views are also subtly different from the domestic Chinese' view. With a sense of dilemma, they have structured an identity only shared by overseas Chinese with similar

life experiences. An identity exclusively belongs to the specific group. This identity feature is apparent in one discussant's words:

I want to ask, what is the Chinese central government's responsibility for these international anti-China movements? If we fail to recognize the government's problems, then our struggle for the country will lose its original meanings . . . Because the government fails to realize its promises about human rights and press freedom, when we stand on the street, and face people's accusing of China as having no democracy, we feel painful, grievant and sorrow! The only answer we can find is this: 'human rights condition in China is improving' . . . I believe that our protests and rallies have demonstrated to the whole world the legitimacy of the Chinese government, but this does not mean we want the government to rule the country in the old way . . . We want downright reformation. We want a bright China, a democratic China, a China which is not only materially strong, but also morally strong (Mitbbs, Apr 24, 17:29:01, 2008).

This is a personal narrative, but the narrator used "we" instead of "I" throughout the narrative. The "we" here is a symbol of the online discussion group, and also is a hallmark of how much this individual has identified with the online group. The pronoun *we* demonstrates a personal feeling of belonging to a specific group. This group "*struggle for*" China, wanted to "*legitimize Chinese government*", but it also questioned the Chinese government with higher and more ideal requirements such as "*bright China*", and "*democratic China*". A clear and unique group identity has emerged from this context. This united identity was shared by overseas Chinese who felt sympathy with the supportive rallies and participated in the online and offline activities. By articulating the sorrow and hope of the group, and by activating resonance among members, the united identity is strengthened through the discourse.

### *The Influence of Confucianism on Online Group Identity*

During April 2008, many overseas Chinese organized rallies to show their support for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, and to protest against some Western media outlets. Why did these silent "model minorities" decide to alter their lifestyle and put down their work and studies and let their voices be heard? The answer to this question can be complicated, but one thing that is worthy of notice is that many of these rallies were organized in online chat rooms or forums like Mitbbs. Some other immigrant groups also have their own online discussion forums, and they also form their online group identities (Mitra 2005). What is the special feature that greatly empowers the overseas Chinese online groups, and leads them to take action in real life? The concept of identity in traditional Confucianism and its influence on individuals may shed light on the answer.

#### *Selfhood in Confucianism*

Addressing an identity issue without talking about its original cultural features is fundamentally problematic (Chang 2008; Chen & Chung 1994; Ho 1995). Ho (1995) notes that the concept of identity has distinct differences in Western and Eastern cultures.

Chinese culture is one of the oldest cultural heritages in human history. After over 4,000 years, it still reminds to be one of the most stable and influential cultures. The stable structure of the Chinese culture can be partially explained by the stable structure of the Confucian identity (Chang 2008). The influence of Confucianism on Chinese's communication patterns has been widely acknowledged by scholars (Chang 2008; Chen & Chung 1994). In ancient China, the opinions of Confucius and Mencius were authorized by the ruling class (feudalism governments) and influenced the Chinese culture for more than two thousand years. Although other ideologies like Buddhism or Taoism also profoundly shaped the Chinese culture, they rarely have achieved the authoritative status as Confucianism, and therefore have had relatively limited influence (Chang 2008; Chen & Chung 1994). Many scholars suggest that even now, the Confucian tradition still profoundly influences the current Chinese society (Chang 2008; Chen & Chung 1994; Ho 1995).

Traditionally, the Confucian selfhood was a complicated concept which had multi-dimensional meanings (Nan 2005). Basically, every individual is located in a relationship network. The network has five cardinal themes: relationship between "ruler and minister, between father and son, between husband and wife, between brothers and between friends" (Ho 1995:116). Each relationship theme has broad

extensions (which means it includes meanings beyond its literal meaning), and each theme connects well with other themes. The reciprocal and mutually supportive structure forms a very stable social structure, and every individual is located and fixed within certain relationships. Being a person, in a Confucian sense, is to play a proper role which meets the demands of a certain relationship. Therefore, in the Confucian culture, people tend to define themselves in the light of their social positions and their relationship with others (the "others" refer to a broad meaning, could be culture, country, relatives, friends, coworkers, etc.). As Ho noted, "to a large extent, the role assumed by the individual, as a minister, parent, spouse, and so forth, overrides his or her personality to determine role behavior" (1995:161).

When the Confucian individuals identify themselves as a member of a certain group, they will form a strong collective identity (Nan 2005; Ho 1995). To some extent, members of a group share the glory and shame of the group, and members are expected to value collective interests over individual interests.

For overseas Chinese, it may be hard for them to identify with the Chinese government, or the countries they currently live in, or their relatives and friends who are thousands of miles away from them, but their needs for connection are still very strong. These strong needs can easily be tied with "China", the country in its symbolic and cultural level of meaning, then further extend to people who can share this feeling. This complicated identity can be illustrated through the following narrative:

Let us stop talking about political and whatever –isms. I just want to ask one simple question, why do we support China? Not for the party, not for any ethnic group, but for China---the country of 4000 years history and culture. When I come to live in the Western, I really understand that in my blood and soul, I am a Chinese. I am part of this culture, the 4000 year history . . . What I want to protect, is not a government or any people, but the concept of China . . . Who can truly share all the happiness and sadness with us? The people who speak the same language with us; the people who grow up under the same environment with us; the people who carry the same cultural heritage, follow the same values . . . we form a community. Within the community, I can feel the deepest understanding. I love freedom. I follow my will so I left China to study abroad. But I cannot get rid of the longing for the sense of belonging. This is my cultural instinct. Nobody can live beyond his instinct . . . I will choose to protect my community, even with the sacrifice of freedom. This is how I follow my instinct . . . (Mitbbs, Apr 11, 21:26:28, 2008)

Departing from one's own culture and living in a vastly different environment can be confusing. It could be ever more confusing when the new environment denies one's original country and culture. The narrator tried to resolve his or her confusion through first giving denials to what are "not" the motivations of the narrators' actions. After ruled out reasons that the narrator cannot fully identify with, the narrator found that to protect the symbolic China is the most acceptable answer. As an individual from Confucian culture, being "part of" the culture and the history is important because it allows the individual to connect with others who share this heritage. By connecting with others who can truly relate to the narrator, the individual feels the "*deepest understanding*". As discussed before, in Confucian culture, the "*sense of belonging*" is a strong driving power, as strong as "*instinct*", and it is even valued above freedom. The "*we*" represent a group connected through Confucian values. The group identity is so strong that it extends from online forums to influence the individuals' real lives. This is because people influenced by Confucianism will deeply care about their relationship with certain groups, and highly identify themselves with these groups. In other words, the *self* and *group* are not distinctively separated. Rather, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two concepts. Without *group*, no *self* can be meaningful. The collectivism nature of the Confucian culture could persuade members to place group values above individual values, and could motivate them to take action for the interests of the group. Therefore, although overseas Chinese used to be a politically silent ethnic group, and usually follow the Confucian "moderate rules" (*zhongyongzhidao*) in their daily lives (Nan 2005), the group identity which they created online is not a passive form of escaping from their real life problems. Rather, as individuals identify with this group identity, they are reunited in a virtual sense. This also demonstrates the importance of the opportunity provided by the Internet. The year 2008 may not be the first time that overseas Chinese faced considerable challenge, but without the online forums, they may only be able to identify with people they interact on daily bases. The Internet and online forums unprecedentedly provide overseas Chinese space to interact with others across cities and countries. In online forums overseas

Chinese gradually developed united identification, and eventually, when outside tensions increase, the united identity leads members to pursue their collective goals in great passion. Following is a follow-up thread which was used to keep participants posted about a protest rally.

Dear all:

Ever since we sent out the first e-mail. A lot of you have replied, registered, donated money and offered useful advices. Here is the update: Up to now, we have received about \$3000 donation. So many people made their donation and I cannot list their names here. Seattle and San Francisco also send us support from the money they left for their events! Thanks for all your guys' support! And we are deeply touched by your earnestness and feel proud to be involved in this event! Now we have spent about \$2000. So far, we prepared 16 posters, more than 60 large national flags, more than 20 large Olympic flags, about 80 small national flags, several United States flags, one megaphone. Also we ordered 300 T-shirts and sold about 200 now. We printed many materials for distribution. And we plan to spend more on signs. If you want to make some signs for the rally and want to apply for reimbursement, please contact us by replying this email. We will make a detailed list about the expense and the list of donations after the event (Apr 23, 00:01:29, 2008).

This narrator is a volunteer organizer for a rally. When we interpret this historical event through the narrator's description, we can see the enthusiasm and satisfaction that participants gained from being part of a larger group. The collective nature of this rally encouraged overseas Chinese to take actions, and they may no longer feel they are marginalized minorities. Rather, through collective actions, they can jointly resist outside forces. The rallies, therefore, have meaning to each individual not just as assemblies to support China, but also help them to connect with other overseas Chinese, and to regain their cultural confidence and self-esteem. The Internet, in this case, provided the channel for overseas Chinese to share this gratification. To let them know that collectively, they can make differences. And therefore to encourage other overseas Chinese to further join the resistance in real life.

More than four thousands overseas Chinese took part in this peaceful and well organized rally. During April 2008, rallies like this were hold in many cities all over the world. Most of them were spontaneously organized, and all the posts, plans and notifications were executed through online chat-rooms or forums. The realization of these large scale rallies and protests has clearly demonstrated that online group identity formed through online discussions could empower these marginalized individuals and even encourage them to take action in real life.

The function of the Internet as a forum for certain groups to reinforce and share their group identity lies in the core of the discussion of online identity narratives. When the Internet is used as a channel to communicate perceived tensions and grievances, members of disadvantaged group may not only get a sense of sharing, but also potentially gain resources for resistance (Cheung 2004). As the experienced tensions rise, more solidarity among group members can be anticipated, and they may even try to take actions that otherwise, when they are alone, they would not take. This process demonstrates the emancipatory potential of the Internet (Fung 2002). In the case of overseas Chinese, they formed united group identity online. This group helps to bring previously isolated minorities together. Since overseas Chinese are influenced by the Confucian culture, and highly value the group interests, group honor and group image, when they feel their group are challenged by outside forces, "silent minorities" may break the silence and let the world hear their voice.

### *Conclusion*

Hofstede (1991) notes that culture norms are internalized into people's behaviors and worldviews. This study found that although overseas Chinese have left their home country, the Confucian culture still profoundly influences their identity, and leads them to desire relationships and social bonds, and to cherish symbolic meanings related to their cultural heritage.

This study contributes to the debate about the value of the Internet for minority groups. While traditional mass media may still be controlled by dominant ideologies and mainstream voices, new media like the Internet open up channels for disadvantaged or marginalized groups to vent their frustration and to demonstrate their resistance. As Mitra noted, "the opportunity to speak opens up a space where identity narratives can be told" (2005:379). For overseas Chinese, a space to communicate with others with

similar ethnic origin and life experiences has great implications. Online discussions that are carried out over time could help individuals to rebuild identity in a relationship network, and members of this network gradually identify with this group. To put a relationship-oriented people into a relationship network, as described by a Chinese idiom, is like "putting the fish back to the sea" (ruyudeshui). Such a relationship is maintained by real life needs and cultural demands. Therefore, it is not only flexible and stable, but also contains the power of resistance.

Online identity discussions and daily posting of opinions by marginalized groups may appear to be trivial activities to outsiders. However, in Foucault (2000)'s words, this type of small but constant struggle is "local resistance". Such struggles "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" (Fang 2002:191). Moreover, with the help of the Internet, the voices of marginalized groups can be heard by people who sympathize with them, and local resistances can gain chance to unite online. Such resistance may seem to have little importance to elites at first sight, but the accumulated power can be very strong. Some may argue it is still too early to be optimistic about the emancipatory power of the Internet. However, for many, changes are already happening in the real world.

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