The Politics of Electronic Social Capital and Public Sphere in Chinese *Lala* Community: Implications for Civil Society[+]

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Abstract

This article explores the politics of cyber-networks and cyber social bonds in the Chinese lesbian community. It further discusses the implications of these networks and the online mediation of social bonds for Chinese civil society. Underlying this article are two analytical concepts – the public sphere and electronic social capital. Both concepts define the realm wherein social and political initiatives and movements from below may grow. It is argued in this article that, as the *Lala* community continues to develop, more and more homosexuals and same-sex couples are being awakened to promote and assert their civic rights in a country which has for decades virtually denied them the full protection and assurance of fundamental human rights. This paper maintains that the Internet has helped liberate the Chinese lesbian community in the sense that the cyberspace as a gendered platform has facilitated the emergence, formation, and development of electronic social capital and the public sphere, albeit it is still in the incipient stage.

Keywords: *Lala community, electronic social capital, public sphere, Internet, China, civil society*

JEL classification: *D83, K42, P37, Z13*

1. Introduction

There is a relatively developed literature in the West, particularly in the US, that suggests that the Internet may enhance or facilitate social capital and develop what Jürgen Habermas originally called the "public sphere". In particular, most of the literature that deals with the impact of the Internet on democracy and democratization has tended to focus upon what might be described as the long-term consequences; the ways in which the Internet and

innovative information technology may facilitate greater civic engagement and political participation by reducing the costs of entry, making it easier for new political parties or opposition groups to be created and enter the political scene (Smith, 2009; Bimber, 2003; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Hill and Sen, 2005). This seems, however, a premature issue for the People's Republic of China since it is far from any of the situations we have witnessed in the West – the unease about the weaknesses of representative democracy, crisis of democracy and the erosion of the sense of community in the West, particularly in the US (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, 1975; Putnam, 1995: 65-78; Pharr, Putnam and Dalton, 2000: 5-25; Norris, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000).

A growing literature on the Internet in developing and undemocratic countries has suggested that the Internet may play a rather different role from that in developed democracies. Instead of a mediating role boosting the emergence of public/political participation and the evolution of electronic social capital as well as a virtual public sphere, it may be compatible with, even strengthen, authoritarian regimes (MacKinnon, 2010; Margolis and Moreno-Riaño, 2009). Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas, for instance, explore Internet use in their book on eight non-democratic countries: two semi-authoritarian (Egypt and Singapore) and six fully authoritarian (China, Cuba, Vietnam, Burma, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia), and four areas of Internet use: civil society, politics and state, the economy and the international sphere. They concluded that the Internet is serving less as a catalyst for democratization and more as a tool to fortify these regimes (Kalathil and Boas, 2003). Similarly, Christopher R. Hughes and Gudrun Wacker in their edited book on China and the Internet further argue that China is achieving a high degree of success in monitoring the information and even using it as a means of control and influence (Hughes and Wacker, 2003). Both works suggest that "(semi-)authoritarian states"[1] such as China are likely to marginalize the role of the Internet in moulding the public space and online social capital.

The Internet, however, may still have an impact upon authoritarian regimes like China. One dimension of this is the use of web sites to dis-seminate government information and allow feedback from citizens. Another alternate dimension could be horizontal communication between citizens on discussion boards and through social media. In Howard Rheingold's argument, "the political significance of computer-mediated communication lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on power communications media, and perhaps thus revitalise citizen-based democracy." (Rheingold, 1994: 14) Although he was primarily focusing on the opportunities in the US, the same argument can be extended to China. The Bulletin Board System (BBS), discussion boards, listservs and online

social media sites, such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Linkedln, Myspace, and YouTube, may be utilized to share information, exchange ideas, debate issues, mobilize opinion, and eventually to build lasting relationships and social bonds. Acknowledging that non-democratic regimes have to a differing degree exhibited more concerted efforts to control the Internet even as they simultaneously expand the presence of the new media within their borders, Geoffry Taubmann has further wondered whether there is any built-in incompatibility between non-democratic rule and the Internet (Taubmann, 1998: 255-272).

This article explores the politics of cyber-networks and cyber social bonds in the Chinese lesbian community. The implications of these networks and social bonds mediated online for China's civil society are also discussed. Underlying this article are two analytical concepts – the public sphere and electronic social capital. Both concepts define in this article the realm wherein social and political initiatives and movements from below may grow. This paper argues that the Internet has helped liberate the Chinese lesbian community in the sense that the cyberspace as a gendered platform has facilitated the emergence, formation, and development of electronic social capital and public sphere, albeit it is still in the incipient stage.

2. Internet, *e*-Social Capital and the Public Sphere

The notions of the public sphere and social capital have usually been addressed and debated separately in the social sciences. Rarely have they been studied jointly together with the Internet. Since the Internet has led to both media and sociopolitical revolutions in developed and developing countries since the mid-1990s,[2] I propose linking together the public sphere, social capital and the Internet to deepen the analysis of the sociopolitical impact of the Internet upon any given state context, whilst adding a normative dimension to the analysis.

Jürgen Habermas defined the concept of public sphere in *Between Facts and Norms* as a network for communicating information and points of view, where the streams of communication are filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinion (Habermas, 1996: 360). To him, association life is the material from which the public sphere emerges (Young, 2000: 170). In fact such association life does not necessarily imply physical proximity, as the classical example of café bars suggests.[3] W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman have argued that the public sphere refers to the areas of informal life – ranging from cafés, Internet chat rooms, or any place where the exchange of public opinion is held – where ideas and feelings relevant to politics are transmitted or exchanged openly (Bennett and Entman, 2000: 2-3).

In this regard, like-minded citizens may be able to gain a voice in public affairs outside formal democratic institutions (Tocqueville, 1945; Dahlberg, 2001: 615-633; Poster, 1996: 201-217; Kellner, 1998: 167-186; Dahlberg, 2001). Interactive communication mediated by the Internet and other informational technologies represents not merely a two-way process, but also a many-to-many channel of sharing, disseminating, relaying and exchanging information, whether top-down, bottom-up, vertically or horizontally. Hence by providing a new technology for public forums, the Internet opens new possibilities for citizen associations (Klein, 1999: 213-220). Robert Putnam further links civic associations and voluntary associations with what he terms "social capital" for public/political participation and effective governance, after he has documented a long-term decline in American civic involvement from the 1960s (Putnam, 1995: 65-78; Putnam, 2000; Putnam, 2002). He explains that social capital refers to connections among individuals, through social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (Putnam, 2001: 19), that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 1996: 34-48).

A growing literature from the late 1990s has begun to connect the role of the Internet with the concepts of social capital and the public sphere in advanced industrial democracies (Wellman, Haase, Witte and Hampton, 2001: 436-455). Relatively few works, however, have applied the same approach to less developed democracies and undemocratic countries. Those few works that have been written tend to treat the Internet as an isolated socioeconomic phenomenon without considering how interactions on the Net may form together with other societal impacts and influence ordinary people's political participation. Christopher Marsh and Laura Whalen are among the few who have conducted research on e-social capital and the Internet with regard to the Chinese context. Building upon the concept of "social capital" which is borrowed from James Coleman and is defined as a form of social organization that facilitates the achievement of goals that otherwise might not be achieved, Marsh and Laura postulate that the Internet and cyberspace allow for a "new and unique" form of social organization that can be used to generate an electronic form of social capital in the Chinese context.[4]

Whilst some scholars have argued that cyberspace holds an enormous potential for the creation and development of social networks which provide the necessary grassroots for the strengthening and intensifying of social mobilization and eventual social transformation, others have seen the Internet and its associated communities with more scepticism, arguing it creates passivity and provokes isolation which actually corrodes social activism.[5] After examining Chinese people's access to and use of the Internet, together with the government's (in)ability to control this medium, they come to the

conclusion that the Internet users undermine state control and contribute to the formation of a civil society (Marsh and Whalen, 2000: 61-81).

In the issue of homosexuality, scholarship on the impact and socio-political meanings of Chinese same-sex relationships first emerged during the 1990s. It is partly driven by a newly found academic interest in the possibilities of gay and lesbian civil action and their alternative or dissenting voices *vis-à-vis* sexual "correctness" in traditional Chinese context. The deepening economic reform has also helped carve out more dynamic and competing media practices, in a liberal way contributing to a more dynamic atmosphere debating or contesting Chinese homoerotica. Such an issue was previously uncharted terrain of scholarly discourse, remaining either ignored or barely probed by the academic community.

After all, the politics of homosexuality still remains a marginalized theme of China's gender studies. In a way, the meanings, influences, and politics of female same-sex desire, their collective identity, and cyber networks and social bonds continue to be underexplored whilst the country's economy becomes globally interconnected and wired.

It is, consequently, that the Chinese lesbian community is worth study-ing primarily for two reasons: firstly, authoritarian China has persistently maintained a broad control and censorship over the mass media during the reform and opening period, and has been relentless in repressing defiant and dissenting voices and opinions. Homosexuality has been predominantly suppressed as it has been considered to make up a potential sociopolitical nuance and a threat to the purity of the Communist rule. Thereby, homosexuals had been historically perceived as sexual deviants in China; over the past few decades they were treated as mentally disturbed or even criminals. The advent of new communication technology, especially the Internet, has provided one of the few spaces where these same-sex individuals may be able to identify and express themselves, and to develop their sense of belonging by creating "virtual" communities and networks in which their common sexual identity, attachment, and bond may be built. Therefore, the possibilities, implications, and limits with which the new information technology provides in the creation of communal identity, social mobilization, and activism are of academic interest if we are to look at the issue from a comparative perspective of economic and sociopolitical transitions in (post-)communist regimes.

Secondly, it is also worth researching in the sense that the lesbian community, as it develops and progresses, is neither established for political purposes, nor as a means of dissension; many of these different sets of same-sex communities have effectively organized and mobilized communities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer to advocate their rights and freedoms. The gay and lesbian communities had been largely underground but are now developing in Chinese cyberspace in which an even wider range

and scope of information and advocacy are more available. From time to time, they are moving their (regular) meetings from more secure cyberspace to offline "real" encounters, such as public meetings, conferences, and festivals to enhance their bonds as well as address their concerns. A milestone event of the *Lala* community was the 2001 Lesbian Cultural Festival in which hundreds of lesbians and gays from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, participated in this self-organized activity. Despite its objectives of simply holding a series of conferences, film series and other cultural events, the Chinese government responded to the Festival by assigning (cyber)police to interrogate participants and record their names in official police documents, causing fear and anxiety amongst organizers and attendees (Wang, 2004). Considering these developments, an exploration of Chinese *Lala* community may make a *de facto* contribution to an understanding of the influence and politics of these marginalized people/communities in transitional China as these Internet-based and -enabled *Lala* communities should reveal deep implications for China's civil society and democratic development.

In short, the reintegration of China into the international arena that is set in motion by the development of a market economy has triggered a new wave of gender and cultural study, especially during the information age. The sociopolitical meanings and impact of female homoeroticism and its online presence have become a significant object of discussion, contention, and study in both the Chinese public and academic arenas.[6]

3. Chinese *Lala* Community in Cyberspace

The term *Lala* (拉拉) is a simplified form of the word *lesbian* which originally appeared in Taiwan in 1998 and was introduced to mainland China through "feminist"[7] and LGBTQ networking.[8] *Lala* is intimately attached to the lesbian community to denote women's same-sex love and collective identification. It is also commonly applied to the notions of "women-loving-women" gendered sexuality along a masculine-feminine grid in individual subjective identification. Within the *Lala* or queer sexuality, these lesbian are known as T (tomboy) and P (*po* 婆), which means "wife" in Mandarin Chinese. It now refers mostly to the Internet-based communities whose interests centre on the subject of female same-sex mentality, desires, and sexuality. Compared with the experiences of Taiwan and Hong Kong, the TP roles are, nonetheless, relatively recent to mainland China.

In retrospect, "homosexuality" (*tongxinglian* 同性恋) was suggested to be popular in China's Song (宋, 960-1279), Ming (明, 1368-1644), and Qing (清, 1644-1911) dynasties. Chinese homosexuals did not actually experience high-profile persecution when compared to their counterparts in Europe during the Middle Ages.[9] In fact, there were actually certain degrees of cultural tolerance

of homosexuals in ancient China (van Gulik, 1961). Yet, homo/bisexuality began to be treated as the "colonial importation of modern Western sexology, Christian homophobia, and the medicalisation of homosexuality" in modern China, in particular around 1920s and 1930s (Chou, 2000: 42). Specifically, it is argued that "it was the sexologist's pathologisation of homosexuality rather than the Christian homophobic attitude that was selectively and strategically adopted by Chinese intellectuals who had their own sociopolitical agenda in mind." (Chou, 2000: 49) Same-sex eroticism had since then been regarded as pathological by Chinese intellectuals since they were enlightened by Western scientific discourses. Political elites as well as the intelligentsia began to demonstrate intolerance towards homosexuality as they repeatedly addressed it as a "diseased state" (*bingtai* 病态) or "metamorphosis" (*biantai* 变态), and thereby viewing homosexuality as an aberration and a mental disease.

After the Communist Party came to power in 1949, the government has given more emphasis on social and moral orders, and as a result, resulting in the intensification of prosecution and imprisonment of homosexuals since the 1950s onwards. Mao Zedong 毛泽东 prominently considered homosexuals products of a "mouldering lifestyle of capitalism" (Contreras, 2007).[10] Homosexual acts and conduct were then deemed as "illegal" and would be severely punished under the statutes of "hooliganism" (*liumangzui* 流氓罪) within the Chinese criminal code. The situation was further aggravated during the Cultural Revolution (*wenhua dageming* 文化大革命) between 1966 and 1976, at which time homosexuals were penalized by re-education in labour camps (*laodong jiaoyu* 劳动教育; *laojiao* 劳教), public humiliation and torture, or rural exile (*xiafang* 下放). Sometimes, they were executed secretly (Laurent, 2005: 179-180). Individual sexual preferences had accordingly given way to lofty revolutionary ideals. To some extent, sex was treated as a political tool for social control. To advance one's career, he or she had to be sexually well-behaved during China's revolutionary period.

Since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) embarked on the so-called "reform and opening-up" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) policy in the late 1970s, Chinese society has undergone a series of dramatic transformations in almost all realms of social, cultural, economic and political life. Despite the increasing trend of polarization, the majority of the Chinese people have benefited from economic reform. Some have inevitably benefited more than others. Against the backdrop of rising social discontents and mass popular protests (Wu and Lansdowne, 2009), China's post-1978 transition from "socialist planning" to "market socialism" has been effectively accompanied by subtle crucial shifts on people's sex lives.

The CCP made a fateful decision thirty years ago to allow newspapers, magazines, television, and radio stations to compete in the marketplace instead of being financed exclusively by the Party and Government. Thanks

to the intensified media globalization, commercialization and conglomeration, China's media sector, once merely the Communist Party's mouthpiece (*houshe* 喉舌), is today becoming a media industry that covers more stories directly relevant to ordinary people's lives and caters for their needs. Apart from that, a few of the media outlets are somehow reshaping themselves from a pure propaganda machine into an agent of watchdog journalism. In short, newspapers, magazines, and Web-based news sites navigate the cross-currents between the open marketplace and the CCP censors (Shirk, 2011; Lee, 2000; Zhao, 1998). Whilst many media conduits still principally toe the Party line for editorials and for some sensitive political or socio-ethnic issues/stories, they, nevertheless, enjoy more operating autonomy than they were before on occasions of reporting negative news and conducting investigative journalism in order for their publications and coverage to be more readable, reliable, and eventually profitable in the competitive media markets.

Admittedly, globalization and increased economic wealth have jointly set in motion in China's online media, making the media practices further commercialized and from time to time, stirring up for sensational news or blog articles in their virtual presence. These increasingly commercialized media practices bear implication for the transitional Chinese society. One topical case is that of Mu Zimei 木子美, a 25-year-old sex columnist on *City Pictorial*. Mu was small-fry until she became a household name in the Internet community on account of her most controversial work – diaries of sexual encounters which appeared online from mid-June 2003. Sina.com (新浪) has carried the serialization since November 11, 2003. One of Sina's managers explained their action thus: "Sina.com normally attracts 20 million hits daily. However, the number immediately jumped to 30 million and stayed there for 10 days soon after the serialisation of Mu Zimei was online."[11] Sina.com therefore credited Mu with attracting 10 million extra hit a day. Sohu.com (搜狐) has claimed that Mu Zimei is the name most often typed into its Internet search engine, surpassing one occasional runner-up, Mao Zedong.[12] Mu's writings have fuelled a wide-ranging debate about sexuality and gender on the Internet, and inspired more people to write weblogs full of various personal experiences. Sina.com was later attacked by *Beijing Wanbao* 北京晚報 (Beijing Evening News) for its lack of social responsibility and excessive pursuit of online popularity for commercial gain.[13] As a result, Sina.com has reduced its coverage and moved related reports from an eye-catching layout spot to a less noticeable position in response to some of these criticisms.

By this kind of coverage, commercial Internet outlets like Sina.com are helping to emancipate a relatively fettered society and allowing once-taboo subjects to be more openly discussed, both online and offline. The Internet is now impacting on China's sociopolitical environment, creating a pluralized society where diversified public interests may coexist. The private Internet

entrepreneurs have provided a loosely regulated platform that serves a wide range of these interests. Despite some negative impacts on society, there is no doubt that different public interests and needs may now converge in Chinese cyberspace.

The enhanced education has also played a role in China's ongoing sexual liberation and revolution. The end of the Cultural Revolution marked the normalization of Chinese higher education development. By 2009, China's college enrolment rate has roared to 62 per cent, which is a substantial increase from 6.1 per cent in 1979.[14] Normally younger people tend to adopt different sexual orientation identity from their elder generation as they are more geared towards the pursuit of equality, freedom and self-realization. Reform and opening-up policies in China have equally seen the change in the reorganization of social stratification (*shehui jieceng* 社会阶层) from previous social class (*shehui jieji* 社会阶级) discourse.[15] This considerable change is intimately associated with China's ongoing socioeconomic transformative processes, coupled with many forces of globalization and regionalization. Globalization is as such referred to as the process by which regional economies, societies, and cultures have become more integrated through sophisticated information and communication technologies, advanced and convenient transportation, and intensified international trade. Globalization can, in other words, be argued as being driven by a combination of economic, technological, sociocultural, political, and biological factors (Croucher, 2003: 10). Apparently, globalization has already set forth changing mentality of consumerism, secularization and pop culture amongst Chinese people, including intellectuals (Yan, 2009; Yu, 2010).

Through the intimate exchanges and assistances from international academic communities, non-profit international organizations, Chinese rights activists as well as academics are endeavouring to raise people's awareness through various socio-gender projects, workshops and conferences on (homo)sexuality, health, and AIDS prevention programmes (Liu, 2008: 104-113). AIDS prevention has particularly been emphasized by global human rights activists and civil society organizations as well as the Chinese government. Sexual education and health has been the important theme that needs to be repeatedly and openly addressed and debated so as to better tackle the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic in China (Parry, 2006: 261-262). In this regard, China Central Television (CCTV), for instance, widely discussed about homosexuality and AIDS in TV shows in December 2004 and March 2005, entitled, "Homosexuality: Confronting is Better than Evading" (*tongxinglian: huibi buru zhengshi* 同性恋：回避不如正视) and "People in the News: What I know about Chinese Gays" (*xinwen huiketing: wo liaojie de Zhongguo nan tongxinglian* 新闻会客厅：我了解的中国男同性恋), respectively. Chinese homosexuals have even made their debut on local and central TV from the

late 1990s. The first homosexual studies course opened for graduate students at Fudan University as early as in September 2003.[16] And the first Chinese gay marriage took place in Chengdu in January 2010 as well.[17]

In this globalized world, more Chinese people can now travel across countries and from one region to another. Data sharing and exchange of electronic information have likewise become much easier through modern information technology and the Internet-enabled social media, such as the Short Messaging Service (SMS), cyber-based chat rooms, facebook and online blogs, such as Sina Mini-blog (新浪微博). Their conducts in cyberspace and the physical world are to facilitate public understanding and discussions regarding (homo)sexual issues and to promote gender equality and gay rights. All this information, good and bad, has indeed helped push aside many of China's traditional sexual taboos and hence is undermining conventional norms and perceptions of sexual practice, despite the fact that the Chinese authorities periodically hunt down the authors of subversive verses.[18]

Although the exact number of Chinese who identify themselves as homosexual is not very clear, China's health authority, the Ministry of Health (*weisheng bu* 卫生部), estimates that there are around 30-40 million homosexual men and women in total.[19] Chinese sociologist Li Yinhe 李银河 conducted an opinion survey in 2008 in which 91 per cent of respondents claimed to agree with homosexuals having equal employment rights. The respondents claimed that "employment is how people make a living and feed their families … [we] don't want to take away the homosexual community's means of survival." (Li, 2008)

Gender equality is officially proclaimed to be one of China's national policies and is enshrined in PRC's Constitution. However, to a large extent, mainstream discourse still tends to ignore or play down sexual issues and gender inequality/injustice. In a nutshell, the mainstream media usually treats sexuality and related issues as insignificant, let alone gay and lesbian employment rights, same-sex marriage, women's sexual rights, diversity of sexualities amongst Chinese women and their sociopolitical participation in public affairs.

As far back as 1997, China's Criminal Law decriminalized sodomy. Homosexuality was in 2001 removed from the list of mental disorders by the Ministry of Health. In other words, there is no apparent law against homosexuality or same-sex acts between consenting adults. Together with the Ministry of Health, China's Psychological Association has also removed homosexuality from the "Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders and Diagnostic Criteria" (*Zhongguo jingshen jibing fenlei ji zhenduan biaozhun* 中国精神疾病分类及诊断标准) on 20th April 2001.[20] This in part reflects the official discourse on homosexuality beyond a strictly political (Western decadence, *xifang tuifei* 西方颓废), legal (crime, *fanzui* 犯罪) or psychiatric

(illness, *jibing* 疾病) framing (Fang, 1995; Li, 1998). Yet, under the current repressive political atmosphere, it is believed that the Chinese policy towards the gay and lesbian issues adopts the "Three Nos" (*san bu* 三不) policy: no approval (*bu zhichi* 不支持), no disapproval (*bu fandui* 不反对), and no promotion (*bu tichang* 不提倡). Sexual minorities, mostly referring to gays and lesbians, are under-respected and under-protected in social and legal terms.

China's economic success for the past three decades has also seen the emergence of a middle class. Some members of this middle class have homosexual preferences and seek to protect and expand their socioeconomic freedom by cautiously pressing for legal reform/justice and diligently enhancing the consciousness amongst LGBTQ. As Chinese society becomes more open and globalized, the rising (middle) class of lesbian and gay are becoming more assertive socially and politically in the sense that these activists have begun to challenge the prevalent sexual ideologies and have striven for better access to media of public communication. By way of using the power of the mainstream media, they attempt to publicize their voices and to mobilize and recruit in order for them to win the alliance of sympathetic Chinese third parties. Nonetheless, Chinese homosexual activists are in most cases denied from entering the mass media and are being portrayed negatively in the current sexually biased mainstream mediaspace. Accordingly, they have turned to alternative channels of communication to foster public knowledge, awareness and understanding about homosexuality, aiming to achieve both recognition and legal protection of the civil rights of *same-sex* individuals on a par with *cross-sex* people in China. The new media is in this regard transforming into one of the most potent catalytic agents of sexual liberation, revolution, and rights protection for LGBTQ in China.

The key to China's dramatic transformation of sexual revolution hinges on the Internet. Social scientist Howard Rheingold argues that, by creating "smart mobs" or "associations of amateurs", Internet-related technologies "enable people to act together in new ways and in new situations where collective action was not possible before" (2003: xviii). In this aspect, the Internet wields influence on sexual behaviour through promoting alliances, sharing knowledge, and providing a platform where diverse voices may be better heard and forcibly respected. Many informal homosexual social networks have developed through both the Internet and blogosphere. There are many stories of individuals who have come to accept and/or revealed their sexual identity mainly because of the Internet. It is obvious that the Internet is a powerful channel for people to find sexual partners, to organize on- and off-line activities, and to have access to gender knowledge and information. The Internet does provide a level of anonymity that is otherwise rare in Chinese society. In short, Chinese cyberspace is being utilized by *Lala* and gay

groups as a conduit to conduct "virtual" communication and cyber-activity, hence facilitating self-expression and the formation of sexual identity, and mobilizing and organizing to assert their rights in the physical world.

Lala collective spaces were virtually non-existent until the mid-nineties. Amongst other things, a combination of international efforts, such as the 1995 UN Women's Conference, the formations of HIV/AIDS networks, and some other local events, have made the emergence of (semi-)public venues for LGBTQ possible. By 2011, China is experiencing a dynamic upsurge in semi-public community building that is diversifying into not only a greater variety of bars but also semi-public and *Lala*-identified organizations, conferences, research projects, free zones, and mainstream media exposure. Some *Lala* activists have even managed to appropriate their state-designated organizational structures and turned them into resources for cyber mobilization and collective identity building. The relational dynamics of mutual constitution of the electronic social capital and *Lala* communities in Chinese cyberspace are now emerging and impacting on transitional society. This argument is *per se* an extension to what Guobing Yang has previously argued that "the interactions between civic associations and the Internet have produced a 'web' of civic associations in China and that this 'web' is civilly engaged." (Yang, 2009: 154) One cannot, however, expect the Internet and ICTs alone to be the sole agent of the prospects of democratic transformation in China. It is effectively the actual utilization of the Internet by real people and civil society groups, particularly LGBT rights activists in this case, both in cyberspace and in the physical world, to further advance gay rights by not only publication and conferences, but also by social awakening, legal action/ petition, and eventually political reform. Zixue Tai has rightly reminded us that, "As the Internet further penetrates every aspect of life in Chinese society and as it becomes deeply ingrained into the everyday life of ordinary Chinese citizens, the revolutionary effects of the Internet on Chinese civil society will be more earthshaking." (Tai, 2006: 292)

4. Conclusion

Over the past few decades, social and political communications have been extensively transformed by accelerated processes of globalization, liber-alization and deregulation as well as by the diffusion of information and communication technologies (Stanyer, 2003: 385-394). The forces of media commercialization and conglomeration have also given rise to a series of general tendencies at the level of national politics – altering the ways in which political actors attempt to communicate with one another (Hong and Hsu, 1999: 225-242; Morris and Waisbord, 2001). Manuel Castells vividly argues that all politics now subsist within the frame of electronic media (Castells,

2000: 391-392). The Internet has indeed emerged and spread exponentially, constituting a media revolution in both the developed and most developing countries from the mid-1990s (Castells, 2000: 77-162).

From the 1980s onwards, we have seen a dramatic rise in alternative sources of information and news report in China. Access to alternative information and dissenting opinion has not only been pivotal in allowing individuals to find and adjudicate amongst different accounts of event and news stories; it has also enabled and encouraged individuals to discourse and deliberate on public issues. Under the circumstances, the development and propagation of the Internet throughout the world has resulted in enormous social, political and cultural changes, and authoritarian China is not an exception. The networked medium of the Internet has provided a newer mode of communication and enlarged a wider scope of information dissemination; it has also created new platforms for voicing opinions, mobilizing people and organizing communities. It signifies the Internet has effectively empowered individuals as well as the society as a whole by diversifying newer sources of alternative/dissenting information and channels for civic association and engagement (Zheng, 2008). Likewise, Chinese cyberspace continues to develop through "a series of complex interactions between the state, market mechanism, intellectual establishments, and new technologies" (Zhou, 2006: 177).

In this respect, the phenomenon of the *Lala* community is an interesting subject in that it examines the ways in which social organization is developed, social activism/movement is nurtured, public empowerment and dissent are formed and mediated on- and off-line. An examination of the *Lala* community, both as a non-political space of self-identity creation, and as a political space of dissent and community organization, may serve to explore many of the potentials of the Internet in the development of homosexual civil rights development. The Internet and its affiliated chat rooms make information relatively accessible from and amongst the grassroots level. Such horizontal communication and civil organizations have the potential to challenge those assertions made by authoritarian governments about their sociopolitical control. Cyber publics like *Lala* community are now better enjoying the relative ease of (horizontal) communication just as easily as the process can be performed through China's top-down propaganda channels by the Party-State, such as Internet versions of state-owned media coverage and the electronic government projects. In other words, with the Internet, marginalized people like *Lala* groups can now speak more freely amongst themselves, debate and consult with ideas and public issues more easily, and gradually engage with the mainstream generators of news and opinions such as the official media and propaganda machine, resulting in far-reaching social and political influences in the transitional Chinese society.

With the rising expectations and public demands for an improved quality of life and protection of social, economic, and political rights, *Lala* citizens as well as other (middle) class may not merely want the Communist regime to address their demands through (state-owned) mass media or other official apparatus, such as legal complaint letter (*xinfang* 信访) or visit system (*shangfang* 上访), but also request adequate channels to proactively articulate them in the first place and safeguard their rights (*weiquan* 维权) (Hung, 2010: 331-349) in appropriate manners. This bottom-up force and pressure derived from the general public and LGBTQ may facilitate and reinforce a favourable social basis of the twin effects: the increasingly dynamic civic society and Internet diffusion. It means this incipient online civic engagement as well as fledging public space serves as a precondition for civil society, which in turn is both the foundation of and a necessary ingredient for any future democracy/democratization in China. A nascent public space for "virtual" civic engagement, albeit with Chinese characteristics, can indeed be found in online forums and offline community in Chinese society.

China cannot be fully immune from the influence of global lesbian and gay rights movement and the changing dynamics of Internet politics. Chinese *Lala* communities are coming to terms with and protecting their homosexual rights and freedoms today in the information age, as what Manuel Castells has suggested:

> In fact, freedom is never a given. It is a constant struggle; it is the ability to redefine autonomy and enact democracy in each social and technological context. The Internet offers extraordinary potential for the expression of citizen rights, and for the communication of human values. Certainly, it cannot substitute for social change or political reform. However, by relatively levelling the ground of symbolic manipulation, and by broadening the sources of communication, it does contribute to democratisation. The Internet brings people into contact in a public agora, to voice their concerns and share their hopes. This is why people's control of this public agora is perhaps the most fundamental political issue raised by the development of the Internet.
>
> (Castells, 2001: 164-165)

Notes

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1. China remains "an essentially Leninist party-state (党国) in the sense that the members of the Standing Committee and Politburo of the Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party (中国共产党中央政治局常务委员会) continue to enjoy *de facto* monopoly power and are not accountable to political or judicial constraints." See Preston and Haacke (2003: 10).

2. The most recent example of the Internet-enabled revolution took place in Tunisia in which President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was forced out of the presidency by people power and popular protests in late 2010. The 2010-2011 Tunisian Revolution is also called "the Jasmine Revolution" by many media organizations, and which was the impetus of the Arab Spring. See "North Africa: Tunisia's 'Jasmine Revolution'", *Africa Research Bulletin*, Vol. 48, Issue 1, pp. 18675A-18685C, February 2011.

3. As Antje Gimmler has pointed out, Habermas was pessimistic about the return of a critical public sphere in his earlier work (1962 German versions and 1989 English version). Nonetheless he changed his mind and argued that the return of such a sphere is possible within the resurgence of civil society itself. See Gimmler (2001: 25); Curran (2002: 234).

4. Traditionally, social capital must be formed in civil society where it is a relatively autonomous sphere in a society which rests between the state and the private sector. The "new and unique" environment afforded by cyberspace provides the form of social organization that can be used by democratization movements in authoritarian regimes, despite these regimes' best efforts to control civil society and organized opposition. See Marsh and Whalen (2000: 62, 66 and 67). Besides, for Coleman's concept of social capital, see Coleman (1990: 304).

5. For a general review of the discourses and theories regarding the possibilities and potential of the Internet, see Slane (2007: 81-105); DiMaggio, Hargittai, Robinson and Newuman (2001: 307-336); Crossley and Roberts (2004).

6. See further discussions at Sang (2003).

7. It is usually argued that feminism and female homosexuality came about in the development of lesbian feminist theory during the 1970s, where "Feminism at heart is a massive complaint. Lesbianism is the solution." See Johnston (1973: 166).

8. LGBTQ is a conceptual shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer.

9. It is generally believed that prior to the secularization of sodomy prohibitions in the sixteenth century, lesbian and homosexuality is regarded as a distinctively unmentionable crime. See Calhoun (2000: 83-84).

10. Joseph Contreras, "Legal in Unlikely Places", *Newsweek*, 17th September 2007.

11. Jim Yardley, "Internet Sex Column Thrills, and Inflames, China", *New York Times*, 30th November 2003.
12. Jim Yardley, "Internet Sex Column Thrills, and Inflames, China", *New York Times*, 30th November 2003.
13. "Zenme Kan Mu Zimei 怎么看木子美" [How to look upon Mu Zimei], *Beijing Wanbao* 北京晚报, 16th November 2003.
14. Liu Shinan, "Unqualified Colleges Must be Shut Down", *China Daily*, 12th March 2010.
15. In a collaborative work conducted by sociologists from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), ten strata were noted: (1) national and social management, (2) managers, (3) private enterprise-owners, (4) professional technicians, (5) clerks, (6) industrial and commercial individuals, (7) business service staff, (8) industrial workers, (9) agricultural labourers, and (10) city unemployed, laid-off, and half laid-off vagrants in urban areas. See Lu (2002).
16. Jiao Xiaoyang and Jin Jing, "Fudan Offers Homosexual Studies", *China Daily*, 16th August 2005.
17. Huang Zhiling and Zhang Ao, "In a 'First', Gay Couple Tie the Knot in China", *China Daily*, 3rd January 2010.
18. According to China's Internet regulations, nine categories of information are banned in creating, replicating, retrieving, and transmitting: (1) materials that oppose the basic principles established by the Constitution; (2) materials that jeopardize national security, reveal state secrets, subvert state power, or undermine national unity; (3) materials that harm the prosperity and interests of the state; (4) materials that arouse ethnic animosities, ethnic discrimination, or undermine ethnic solidarity; (5) materials that undermine state religious policies, or promote cults and feudal superstitions; (6) materials that spread rumours, disturb social order, or undermine social stability; (7) materials that spread obscenities, pornography, gambling, violence, murder, terror, or instigate crime; (8) materials that insult or slander others or violate the legal rights and interests of others; (9) materials that have other contents prohibited by laws or administrative regulations. See The State Council (2000).
19. Raymond Zhou, "Gays Live a Difficult Life under Social Bias", *China Daily*, 6th September 2005.
20. "Quiet Pink Revolution in Dark Before Dawn", Xinhua News Agency (新华社), 26th December 2005.

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