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HOMELAND RE-TERRITORIALIZED

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Tingyu Kang

HOMELAND RE-TERRITORIALIZED

Revisiting the role of geographical places in the formation of diasporic identity in the digital age

This paper examines migrants' use of the Internet to re-territorialize homeland, exploring the resurgence of geographical places in making and maintaining identities in the digital age. Conducting semi-structured interviews and participant observation, this research focuses on the London-based Chinese population and demonstrates various ways in which the Internet plays a key role in reinforcing these migrants' territorial attachment. In so doing, I seek to revisit the popular theorization that the Internet has led to the detachment of cultures from geographic places. The findings suggest that migrants use a variety of Internet applications to reproduce their home territories and ethnic cultural practices in both their intimate, personal spaces and public spaces. The linguistic, cultural, and social environments in China are transmitted into migrants' living rooms, London's Chinatown, and other public urban places through P2P applications, high-speed video sharing sites, and social networking sites. This online consumption of visual and audio products is often transmitted live, through which migrants' temporal practices in London become parallel to those in China. Through these uses of the Internet, the boundary between home and abroad is challenged and the power dynamics of the majority and minority surrounding urban land use are destabilized.

Keywords Migration; diasporas; internet; cities; re-territorialization; de-territorialization

Re-territorializing the homeland using the Internet

In this paper, I explore how migrants experience geographical places in their homeland through the use of the Internet. Focusing on the case of the London-based Chinese population, this research demonstrates the ways in which the physical contexts of 'home' are produced and reproduced using the

Internet, thus revisiting the claim that the Internet has reduced the impact of geographical places on cultural experiences.

It is largely theorized that geographical places are losing their significance in producing culture in the age of large-scale migration and media globalization. With the rise of neoliberalism, transnational migration has become one of the most prominent phenomena that shape the contemporary social landscape. Migrants' cultural practices away from their homeland have led to the detachment of cultures from the places where they were thought to be fixed (Appadurai 1988; Clifford 1992, 1997; Giddens 1990). The growing popularity of digital technologies is also theorized as facilitating border-crossing transmission of images, voices, and cultures. Users of these media are now allowed to 'stay home while going abroad' (Moore 1993, 1996). As a result, the Internet has been identified as a key factor that separates cultural experiences from the geographic place where they originate (Moore 1993, 1996; Stratton 2000; Thompson 1995).

Hence, transnational migrants in the information age are portrayed as living a 'timeless time' in a 'space of flows' (Castells 1996; Uimonen 2003). By using the Internet to transmit information globally, migrants are today connected transnationally and are less constrained by the boundaries of either the sending or receiving countries. Borders of nation-states decrease and social activities become less bounded by territorial boundaries (Castells 2000; Webster 2006). Both the theorization of global migration and the perspective of the Internet are thought to be leading to an era of 'de-territorialization' that, according to Nestor García Canclini (1995), refers to 'the loss of "natural" relation of culture to geographic and social territories' (p. 29).

However, I argue that the Internet may also serve to produce a counter phenomenon for the migrants that strengthens rather than loosens the relationship between the geographical places of migrants' homeland and their cultural practices. This is because Internet use helps to efficiently transmit and reproduce the geographical settings of migrants' homelands into the everyday living spaces in their receiving countries.

Internet use is found to be particularly important for diasporic experiences due to its ability to efficiently transmit cultural experiences of and/or from the countries of origin to the receiving countries. Several researchers have found that diasporic individuals are less likely to consume radio and television of their receiving countries, and are more likely to participate in computer-mediated communication to obtain news and other cultural products from their homeland (Carøe Christiansen & Sell 2000; Carøe Christiansen 2004). With a lack of language skills and cultural integration into the host country, diasporic groups are less interested in the media of a host society. Rather, diasporic users turn to the communicative technologies that guarantee a cheap and convenient transnational access to cultures with which they are more familiar, which increases the centrality of the Internet in diasporic lives (Carøe Christiansen 2004; Hussain 2000). Internet use becomes

critical in diasporic everyday lives in that it is an important method to bring homeland and home culture into migrants' daily lives abroad.

The Chinese diaspora in Britain is one of the groups for whom Internet-mediated communication is particularly critical to the formation of cultural experiences and diasporic lives for its marked geographical dispersal and dependency on information technology. Several authors have found that the Chinese diaspora is one of the most geographically dispersed minority groups in the UK, resulting in marked social isolation and relatively insignificant collective action, political engagement, and participation in the public sphere among this group (Dorling & Thomas 2004; Parker 1995; Song 1999). The London-based Chinese population examined in this study, unlike its South Asian and some African and Caribbean counterparts, has not developed geographically clustered residential communities in or around the city.¹ Thus, it has been found that communicative practices using the Internet have become critical in bridging the geographical dispersal of the Chinese population in Britain (Parker & Song 2006). Hence, the role of the Internet in creating ethnic groupings becomes particularly intriguing and significant in the case where ethnic residential communities are absent.

Arguing against the popular theorization of de-territorialization in an age of digital technologies and global migration, the findings of this study demonstrate the ways in which migrants use the Internet to reproduce their home territories and ethnic cultural practices in both their intimate, personal spaces and public spaces. These spaces include their living rooms, bedrooms, and public spaces that are central to the formation of the Chinese diasporic culture, such as Chinatowns, Chinese restaurants and shops, and other urban areas. In this study, I highlight the resistance to existing power relations surrounding land, territory, and boundaries in diasporic individuals' everyday lives. The findings suggest that the boundary between home and abroad and the power dynamics of majority and minority are, to some extent, destabilized through Internet use.

An offline approach: positioning the virtual in a geographical context

While I explore how the migrants' homelands are reproduced in the physical environments of the receiving country, a number of recent studies have begun to pay attention to the potential of the Internet to produce migrants' homelands virtually in various online environments. As Graham and Khosravi argue, '[f]or a displaced people in the diaspora, cyberspace can be an alternative 'territory', where a transnational community or a virtual neighborhood can be constructed' (2002, p. 228).

Mitra (2006) further explains the mechanism underlying the online production of the space of home culture. This research explores how cyberspace

serves as a place of safety for diasporic groups who are less likely to find a physical place to practise their culture and collective actions without experiencing disruption and discrimination from the mainstream public in the receiving country. Drawing on Hall (1980), Mitra (2006) argues that, for migrant groups, a shared place is critical to practising culture and forming identities. As collective expressions of culture by diasporic groups in public physical places are less desirable as a result of their marginal cultural status, migrant groups seek to produce a virtual space where anonymity is assured and where geographically dispersed individuals come together in one place and hence the marginal becomes the dominant. Ethnic cultural activities and expressions are welcomed and safety is secured.

Further concrete examples are illustrated in Helland's (2007) empirical examination of an online religious community for diasporas. Using Web sites, members of Hindu and Jewish diasporas who are less likely to travel to sacred religious places and their sacred homelands are found to reproduce sacred places on the Internet. Digital images of places for pilgrimages on Web sites allow participants to hold collective rituals virtually and experience online the key elements of places – religious sounds, visual experiences, and collective online interactions with other participants.

The above studies have begun to explore how migrants reproduce experiences of places and landscapes of their homeland virtually within networked environments. However, this exploration may need to be further extended. Although these studies examine the ways in which the experiences of homelands are reproduced in online environments, it is also theoretically significant to explore how places of homelands are reproduced in physical environments by using the Internet.

I argue that the Internet can also play a significant role in the construction of diasporic places outside the online environment. The spatial experiences the Internet produces are not restricted to online practices and can be observed from outside the networked world. Drawing on theorists in Internet research who challenge the once dominant approach that focuses exclusively on the virtual (Miller & Slater 2000), I adopt an offline approach, which observes cultural practices that are shaped by Internet use but not necessarily taking place within the virtual world. As Miller and Slater (2000) suggest, I 'treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces' (p. 5) and understand the Internet by observing it from the offline world. This approach examines how offline social, cultural, and spatial activities can be transformed and shaped by Internet use.

To understand how Internet use may produce 'safe places', the study is not limited within the virtual safe places but instead observes and analyses how physical places are made safe by using the Internet. Cities, neighbourhoods, and other geographical places migrants inhabit are shaped through the interweaving process between physical settings and virtual venues that 'function interdependently and will mostly complement each other within transformed pattern of urban life'

(Mitchell 2000, p. 155). Focusing on Chinese migrants based in the metropolitan area of London, I demonstrate a variety of ways in which these supposedly marginalized urban dwellers transform the power relations surrounding land uses, places, and landscapes by using various Internet applications. Through the use of social networking sites, diasporic Web sites, P2P applications, video sharing sites, and other Internet sources, these diasporic people living in the urban area 'make nuanced choices about places to avoid, visit, live or work', thus allowing for new forms of re-territorializing practices among migrants (Hardey 2007, p. 880).

Methods

Ethnographic methods are ideal for researching cultural practices and identity. They require the observation and analysis of cultures based on ethnographers' in-depth immersion in the field and extensive understanding of informants (Hammersley & Atkinson 1989; Robson 1993). The methods highlight the micro-processes of thoughts, interpretations, and identification in everyday life, and link these micro-level cultural experiences to a macro-level social structure (Geertz 1973; Gillespie 1995). Hence, I adopt two key ethnographic methods – participant observation and interviews – to explore migrants' use of the Internet to transform geography and perform identity.

The offline approach of this study guides the research design. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 informants; I had a computer with Internet accessibility in most of the interviews in order for the informants to show and explain to me the virtual spaces we discussed. During the participant observation, I immersed myself in the 31 informants' social lives in several ways. First, I was immersed in the places where the informants used the Internet, including cafés with wireless connections, Internet cafés, and, when the informants agreed, their living rooms and office desks. Second, I joined the co-ethnic gatherings the informants participated in, immersed myself in places for these Chinese Londoners' social activities. These are places where the Internet is not necessarily present but is significantly embedded in informants' interactions and discussions, including places for Chinese diasporic gatherings and Chinese cultural festivals. The interviews and participant observation were conducted between February and August 2008.

The informants of this study are white-collar Chinese Londoners between the ages of 21 and 36.² This group is of particular theoretical significance regarding the political, cultural, and economic dimensions of Internet use. Young middle-class users are an important group in the topic of diasporic culture and Internet use because they are the group whose everyday life is largely exposed to networked environments and hence largely shaped by Internet use. Although the Internet may also be used by economically marginalized diasporic Chinese to

empower themselves and produce culture, Internet use is predominantly prevalent among white-collar professionals. In other words, these white-collar Chinese are the most frequent and significant users of the Internet.

Considering the marked dispersal of the researched population and the difficulty in obtaining a systematic list of this group, this research uses snowball sampling to identify informants. Initial informants were contacted through recommendations from diasporic Internet users I already knew and advertisements on major Web sites for the Chinese diaspora, including groups for overseas Chinese on Facebook and Powerapple (www.powerapple.com). All 31 informants are white-collar professionals based in London. The sample consists of 12 women and 19 men. On migratory history, most of the informants left their family and migrated at a young age to participate in primary and middle schools in England or other English-speaking countries, followed by higher education and full-time employment in Britain. Five informants migrated after completing university and came to England for postgraduate studies, followed by full-time employment in London. Although the informants' migratory histories differ, this group of migrants is generally homogeneous with respect to economic practices and consumption choices and can be described as a group of people with high digital literacy and dependency, for whom Internet use is woven into their everyday lives.

I recorded and translated the semi-structured interviews for further analysis, and took written field notes during the participant observation. The interviews were conducted in the language in which the interviewee felt most comfortable – either English or Mandarin Chinese. During participant observation, I used the dominant language in each social setting, which was mainly Mandarin Chinese. Transcripts and field notes are written in the languages used in the interview or observation, and I translated them into English during the coding process.

This research adopts an interpretive approach to analyse recorded data. The results are produced by identifying the patterns of the informants' production of meanings and interpretations in dialogues and behaviours. These patterns are established and validated through the analysis of transcripts and field notes in several steps. First, I highlighted each behaviour regarding spatial experiences shaped by Internet use, and developed codes and concepts that describe these highlighted behaviours. Then, I grouped similar behavioural patterns together and categorized them into several different themes, thus establishing relations among concepts.

Findings

Accessing the homeland online

As this study focuses on the white-collar section and the younger generation of the Chinese community in London, patterns of Internet use among informants

indicate a high level of digital literacy. All informants stay online for long hours both at work and at home. The informants report using a wide range of Internet sources, including Web sites for news, social networking sites, blogs, instant messaging, P2P and video sharing spaces, and other Web sites for everyday information.

The migrants use these Internet sources to obtain information, cultural products, and other resources that contribute to the maintenance of the identity of being Chinese. Online news is one popular method of obtaining information about their country of origin. Web sites for online news that are popular among the informants include news on major Chinese portal sites and Web sites for Chinese overseas and Chinese in the UK.³ Informants also view blogs written by friends and family overseas and visit blogs of several well-known, popular bloggers in China. P2P and video sharing spaces are used to exchange Chinese music and videos.⁴ These uses of sources all serve to construct an online space that allows informants to share information with each other.

The Internet is not only appropriated to practise Chinese culture by transmitting information and cultural products from China. It also maintains the cohesion of the Chinese diasporic community in London through the use of social networking sites:

I am a member of several groups for Chinese in the UK on Facebook. It allows me to find out where all the other Chinese are and how I can get to know them. I do have some Chinese friends I met in school and at work, but it is still quite limited. Groups like the UK Chinese students or Chinese in London on Facebook make you feel like you are part of the community of Chinese people in London. You are one of them because you know that almost every Chinese-speaking person our age in London is in that group and that you are one of them. And you know that such a connection [of being in the same online group] always exists between you and every other Chinese person in London.

(Lily)

Social networking sites help to reinforce this sense of belonging not only by building online connections between one Chinese Londoner and another. Moreover, it is largely adopted to arrange offline, face-to-face gatherings and meetings among this population in London, thus allowing for collective practices of Chinese culture in the urban space of London. Informants report that Facebook has become one of the most important methods for disseminating information about co-ethnic activities among the younger generation of the London-based Chinese community. Information on social networking sites for the Chinese community in London is predominantly about plans for meetings, activities, and collective actions in a geographically-based place, which extends online social groupings into offline sociality:

In those events [organized through Facebook], you will meet people you've spoken to on Facebook but haven't actually met, people who are your friends' friends, and people you didn't know before. It doesn't feel like you are talking to a total stranger when you meet them, because even though you haven't actually met or talked to them before, you always know they are in your same Facebook group. Plus you hang out together in the places only for Chinese. That makes it a lot easier for two people to become close friends.

(Min)

The social ties built in the co-ethnic events organized on Facebook are strengthened by the fact that the participants belong to the same online ethnic community. Existing online social ties are also further extended into offline social scenes through the use of Facebook. The use of social networking sites leads to an intermingling process between online and offline social ties within the Chinese community in London, thus allowing for a sense of community among this otherwise disconnected group and facilitating collective Chinese cultural practices in the urban area of London.

Transforming personal spaces

Among all the online practices that contribute to the maintenance of a Chinese identity, several of them strengthen the sense of being Chinese by producing a Chinese-style spatial experience – both in personal spaces and in certain public spaces in London.

Internet use is found to transform the migrants' immediate living spaces in several ways. Most informants constantly visit blogs of families and friends in China and download electronic photos. These electronic images of people, events, and landscapes of China are often the primary sources of the informants' home decorations. An informant explains:

I view and download photos from my sister's blog a lot. There are photos of my parents, my extended families during Chinese New Year, and so on. Usually these photos are the themes of my screen saver and desktop. Those photos in the frames [on the table and shelves of the informant's living room] are also from her blog . . . I miss my family a lot. Viewing blogs of family and close friends makes me feel closer to home. Living away from home, you always need these things to remind you who you really are.

(Linda)

Identity is produced through a perceived sense of belonging to a specific geographical location. The Chinese diasporic informants who are away from the geographical

location that fosters their identities are now using the Internet to rapidly bring the Chinese locality into their living rooms in London by electronically transmitting digitalized images of events, people and landscapes in China.

In addition to bringing the visual forms of Chinese locality to the living rooms in London, a 'Chinese-ized' audio environment in the migrants' home is also made possible through a variety of Internet sources. Online radio broadcasts reproduce the Chinese linguistic environment in migrants' living rooms in London, and make these living rooms extensions of places in China by mitigating the effects of differences in time:

I listen to Chinese radio online almost whenever I am home. A lot of Chinese-speaking radio stations based in Asia broadcast their programmes on the Internet. Sometimes I feel like I live in the Chinese time zone. When they have cooking programmes at dinner time, I want to cook. And during the pre-Olympics baseball games [where Chinese Taipei is one of the participant teams], I literally lived in the Chinese time zone to listen to the online radio broadcasting of the games. The games were in the afternoon in Asia but it was around very early morning in England.

(Mo)

Practices surrounding time in migrants' personal spaces are transformed by online radio broadcasts. While temporal differences and time zones used to serve as a key element in differentiating localities, the temporal differences between Taipei and London are now diminished. As a result of expressed national sentiments and identity (through sports and other everyday practices, such as cooking), migrants' temporal practices become similar to those in the locality of the home country, which cannot be accomplished without networked communication across time zones.

Like online radio broadcasts, YouTube and other P2P applications are also popular online sources that contribute to the mitigation of the differentiating effects of temporal differences. Most informants in the study rely on YouTube and popular P2P applications, including Xiaoli and PPStream, for popular cultural products from their homeland. On YouTube, soap operas, sports, and news are uploaded quickly by users in China a few minutes after the programmes air in Asia. P2P applications used by the informants also allow live broadcasting of popular television programmes in China. Many informants follow the timeline and hence receive popular cultural products from their homeland without perceiving the time differences brought by the geographical distance.

In summary, utilizing a variety of Internet sources, including blogs, online radio broadcasting, YouTube, and other P2P applications, Internet use helps to produce a Chinese locality in places that are most personal and intimate to the migrants, thus transforming diasporic places into places where identity and senses of belonging to China are performed. Visual images of Chinese

cultural events and co-ethnic people are downloaded from and displayed on the Internet, through which migrants experience the landscape, people, and culture of their homeland. Audio experiences of Chinese-ness are also produced through constant online consumption of radio, video, and so on, which provides an audio environment where the Chinese linguistic practices become dominant. Moreover, the consumption of live radio, videos, and other cultural products enabled by the Internet also diminishes the time differences that used to play a key role in distinguishing places.

A public place for us

In addition to re-territorializing homeland in intimate personal spaces, the physical contexts of homeland are also recreated in public places for ethnic culture. Chinatowns, for example, are such places where large-scale re-territorialization occurs.

Public spaces in Chinatowns have long been a central urban area for Chinese cultural practices and expressions of identity. In the nineteenth century, Chinatowns across Britain served as a leisure space for Chinese sailors and workers. Chinese catering businesses, small stores for Chinese products, as well as the gambling and sex industries dominated the landscape of the urban space (Newell 1989). In the post-war era, Chinatowns in North America and Britain have been transformed from the once 'vice districts' to tourist attractions, with the rise of the idea of minority cultures as a spectacle in consumption and leisure settings (Light 1974, p. 368). In both eras, urban space was re-territorialized mostly in the ways of bodily practices (costume-wearing during Chinese cultural events), commercial activities (Chinese restaurants and stores), and the physical construction that draws boundaries between the Chinese ethnic space and the rest of the metropolitan city (the Chinese-style entrances built to encircle the area).

Although Chinatowns have been a central place for re-territorialization since the nineteenth century, new technologies have been adopted to produce more diverse forms of spatial experiences of being Chinese in this urban ethnic space.

First, with online radio and video broadcasting, the audio environments in Chinatown are now closely linked to those in China. With the help of online broadcasting, radio programmes broadcast in Hong Kong are often played live in several main stores and restaurants. Other audio products from China are also downloaded from major diasporic Chinese Web sites and played in the commercial settings in London's Chinatown:

Yes, I know about up-to-date pop music in Asia from using the Internet. I browse the most popular and most frequently downloaded music on Powerapple [a major diasporic Web site for overseas Chinese]. My friends and I also talk about music and go to restaurants and stores in Chinatown

where they always play the latest music. If you hear something good, simply ask the staff where they downloaded it.

(Charles)

A public space where opinions and information are exchanged is central to ethnic cultural practices. According to this informant, cultural practices pertaining to popular music and other audio products from China are based in various public spaces. Open, public online spaces such as Web sites for diasporic users are reported to be one of the critical ways in which popular cultural products from the homeland are consumed and articulated. Physical spaces such as Chinatown also serve as an open space for migrants to discuss and share popular cultural resources. Migrants visit Chinatown to obtain up-to-date information and audio experiences about the Chinese popular music industry, which is enabled through Internet use that transmits the audio products from China into the physical environment of London's Chinatown.

The informants also go to London's Chinatown to participate in collective actions that take place in China in the form of online video sharing. A recent case is the public support from the London-based Chinese community for the earthquake in the Sichuan province in mainland China in May 2008. Several fundraising events in London's Chinatown were organized within the Chinese community. The informants gathered in Chinatown and listened to speeches from leaders in China that called for national and international support. These speeches together with related images and information of the earthquake were available in the office of the London Chinatown Chinese Association (LCCA), fundraising stalls in the streets, and stores and restaurants in London's Chinatown using P2P, online video-sharing applications, and major diasporic Chinese Web sites where the sources are shared. All of these practices serve to reproduce the political landscape of China in London's Chinatown, transmitting the visual, audio, and cultural experiences across borders with minimal time difference.

Second, in addition to the digitalization of sounds and videos in Chinatown, the physical constructions that mark the boundary between the ethnic space of Chinatown and the urban area outside it have also increasingly appropriated digital technologies and incorporated digital products. The physical boundary between London's Chinatown used to be marked mainly by the construction of ethnicized buildings, walls, and halls (see Figure 1). Now, digitally edited images consisting of images of Chinese migrants in London and landscapes and major cultural events in China are projected onto walls that mark the boundary of the ethnic territory. These digital constructions of public places are drawn from a wide range of sources using the Internet. A recent example is an event of the mural art display in Chinatown (see Figure 2).

These digital art works that are adopted to be projected onto and transform the physical environments of Chinatown include 1,888 digital photos collected on the Internet by looking for diasporic Chinese's digital photos that represent



FIGURE 1 Ethnicized entrance hall in London's Chinatown. Source: http://www.search.com/reference/Chinese_New_Year.

PHOTO COLLECTION FOR CHINATOWN

1888 photos to collect. 1888 stories to tell. Together we make London's Chinatown special!

We would like to invite you to take part in making a photo mosaic that represents the vibrancy and history of London's Chinatown, using your photos, old and new! Each photo submitted will be entered into a lucky draw to win cash prizes - £20, £40 and £100, with a special £50 bonus prize for the artist's favourite old shot!*

Please send your photos taken in connection with London's Chinatown. With each photo submitted[†], please include your name, contact details, when and why the photo was taken.

Deadline: 25 June 2008

By email: chinatown1888@yahoo.com (300dpi, or in 1024 x 768 min. jpeg format)

By post: PO Box 279, Esher, Surrey, KT10 8YZ

- please enclose a stamped addressed envelope if you would like the photos returned

For further information:
contact the artist, Wang Kei Wong, on 07523 211 995 or chinatown1888@yahoo.com

The photo mosaic will illustrate a full bowl of rice, a simple yet important staple food for all of us - just like Chinatown! It will be on display in Horse and Dolphin Yard.



FIGURE 2 Digital artwork for the transformation of the physical environment of London's Chinatown. Source: <http://www.chinatownartsspace.com/downloads/mural-flyer.pdf>.

the spirit of London's Chinatown. This event was advertised on major Web sites for the London-based Chinese community and photos from various viewers of the Chinese diasporic Web sites were collected online.⁵ Interpretations and experiences of diasporic Chinese-ness in public spaces from various sources

are built into the space of Chinatown as a result of the Internet's potential to reach a large number of users in the community. Using this method to construct an ethnic public place, interpretations of Chinatown and Chinese-ness are democratized as the relatively open access to the Internet serves to invite a wide range of voices and perspectives to the construction of a public ethnic place.

Third, in addition to the efforts to recreate China within the public space of Chinatown, the Internet is also used to expand migrants' spaces for public activities and events outside the 'ethnic enclave' of Chinatown. This is because the use of the Internet to organize co-ethnic activities has brought about new choices of locations for meetings and gatherings among the migrants, which leads to renewed ways in which urban space is experienced by the migrants.

Several informants indicate that gatherings and activities within the Chinese community organized using the Internet have distinctive characteristics from those arranged through other communicative methods in that social ties are publicized in the Internet-organized events. An informant who is an experienced organizer of Chinese social gatherings and an active member in several online forums and Facebook groups for overseas Chinese explains:

Yes, information about activities is usually disseminated using Facebook, HelloUK [a newsgroup for Taiwanese and Hong Kong migrants in the UK], or the likes. I guess they are fun because people who view the Web pages are not necessarily people you already know. You never know who are viewing that information, although you know what kinds of people are on Facebook or HelloUK and they are probably people like you or people who have common friends with you. And, also, it's efficient. If you don't use the Internet, all you can do is to go through your contact list in your mobile phone, and get five or six friends to hang out with. It's going to be a small activity then, and less exciting.

(Peter)

Compared with ethnic activities that are arranged using mobile phones or other communicative methods where participants usually belong to an enclosed social circle, Internet-organized ethnic activities are to some extent publicized because large numbers of people without existing social ties can meet and develop conversations and interactions in these events. As a result of its open access and transparency, information regarding social activities for a migrant community disseminated using the Internet is relatively wide-ranging, thus fostering new social ties that are not only limited to the virtual world but also extend to offline diasporic lives based in geographical places. Large numbers of participants can be reached using this communicative method, which expands social connections rapidly and brings together people who are otherwise disconnected.

Efficiently bringing together a large number of migrants, these ethnic events organized online help to produce safe places outside Chinatown and expand

public spaces for Chinese cultural practices from within Chinatown further to other urban public spaces:

Peter: The large social gatherings we organize do not necessarily take place in Chinatown. If it's five or six people who want to hang out and relax and perhaps do some Chinese karaoke or shop some Chinese foods, yes, you go to Chinatown. Why? Just imagine five or six of us hanging out in, say, some posh, old-school restaurant in Chelsea or Knightsbridge. You just don't feel right. You speak a different language loudly and everything. But if you advertise it on Facebook, you can get a sufficiently large number of people, and then we usually rent an entire restaurant or pub, usually some fancy places that are not necessarily in Chinatown. In events for 50, 60 people like the one I just organized, we conquer whichever party places we like.

Interviewer: Are these large events all advertised online or there are other methods adopted to organize such events?

Peter: Entirely online. . . I guess if you just use the word-of-mouth method like those community activities for my parents' generation, it's not possible to get so many people together for a party. Or at least it will take you three months to do that. That's why I like to advertise parties on Facebook. Simple, efficient, and fun.

Whereas Chinatown serves as a 'safe place' for Chinese cultural practices such as Chinese leisure activities and language speaking, urban spaces outside Chinatown are usually considered unsafe places for these ethnic activities. However, large-scale ethnic activities for Chinese migrants are enabled by the Internet, which allows the group to secure a certain urban place outside the ethnic enclave of Chinatown to practise culture and challenges the boundary between minority and majority users of an urban place. As a result, migrants come together and practise culture outside the ethnic enclave and produce new urban spaces for being socially and culturally Chinese without perceived spatial insecurity.

Different communicative methods entail different decisions about urban space usages. Face-to-face ethnic activities organized using the Internet produce a sense of collectiveness that transforms unsafe urban streets, restaurants, and other public settings into places where migrants belong. They serve to empower migrants' marginalized spatial experiences, thus challenging existing power relations between the minority and majority, the guest workers and host society.

Conclusion and discussion

Internet use transforms migrants' experiences of place, territory, and landscape in the host country by helping to recreate the visual, audio, physical, and social contexts of their homeland in both personal and public spaces. On personal

spaces, the linguistic practices and cultural products in China are transmitted into migrants' living rooms through online radio broadcasts, P2P applications, and high-speed video sharing sites. This online consumption of visual and audio products is often transmitted live, through which migrants' temporal experiences in their personal spaces in London become parallel to those in China. As temporal distinction is one of the key elements that produce boundaries between places, these cultural experiences with minimal time differences serve to re-territorialize China for diasporic individuals in the host territory.

On public places, new digital technologies are adopted not only to transform the traditional Chinese public places such as Chinatowns but also extend public places for Chinese cultural practices into wider urban areas. Social activities for Chinese migrants now rely on the Internet's openness to involve larger numbers of members in the Chinese diaspora. As a result, social events organized using the Internet are publicized to some extent. Efficiently involving more participants in each event, the Internet helps the Chinese diaspora to hold social activities and practise culture collectively in public places outside Chinatown, as the larger size of the events enabled by the Internet allows migrants to practise culture in urban places outside the ethnic enclave without feeling unsafe.

In summary, arguing against the popular perspective that suggests the decreasing significance of geographical places in the age of global migration and Internet use, this study contributes to existing understanding of migrants' Internet use by exploring how the Internet is used to construct physical environments in the host society for migrants. It demonstrates a variety of the ways in which the Internet shapes geographical environments for ethnic culture. While two recent studies have identified a number of ways in which spatial experiences of the homeland are reproduced within online environments (Helland 2007; Mitra 2006), I investigate the empowering offline environments produced by Internet use.

The use of the Internet destabilizes the power relations surrounding Chinese migrants' spatial experiences in the metropolitan city of London. In spaces where migrants have already been in control, such as in their personal spaces or public spaces such as Chinatown, various online sources renew the ways in which migrants rebuild a Chinese cultural environment in the Western metropolitan urban spaces. The Internet also helps to produce new urban spaces where practising culture is safe for migrants.

As this study focuses on the context of younger, white-collar professionals based in a metropolitan area, further research may be required to explore patterns of re-territorialization through Internet use among people of other social backgrounds. Patterns of territorial experiences in rural areas may be largely different from those of urban residents. Moreover, compared with white-collar migrants, migrants in less economically secure positions may be deprived of the time and digital literacy required in order for the Internet to work as an empowering tool to transform spatial marginality of ethnic minority groups. According to the informants, the older generation in the migrant community also seems less

likely to rely on the Internet to obtain information and cultural products from their homeland or to disseminate information about social activities.

The effects of the digital divide are to some extent 'controlled' for in this study, as I focus on a young, economically advanced group in an urban area. The subversive experiences of urban land use among migrants in this study largely centre on middle-class consumption settings and social and leisure scenes for white-collar elites. It is worth noting that although the findings suggest an empowering impact of Internet use among migrants, this effect may vary across migrants in different social strata. To what extent is the Internet used to produce spatial experiences by rural dwellers, working-class users, and the older generation within a migrant group? Whether and how do these uses serve as an empowering communicative method that transforms these groups' supposedly marginalized experiences of land, territory, and landscape? Future research is required to explore the potentially differentiating effects of new media technologies between migrants of various backgrounds.

Notes

- 1 Although there are Chinatowns in large cosmopolitan areas such as London and Manchester, they are primarily commercial areas and do not serve as 'ethnic enclaves' where the Chinese diaspora lives, unlike Chinatowns in other parts of the world, such as New York (Parker & Song 2006, p. 181; Song 1999).
- 2 Full-time students are excluded from the sample as the social settings and spatial experiences are largely different between students and full-time workers.
- 3 The most popular portal site where the informants obtain updated news is Sina (<http://www.sina.com.cn>). Web sites for diasporic Chinese around the globe that are most often visited by the informants include Powerapple (<http://www.powerapple.com>) and Chinaren (www.chinaren.com).
- 4 Although the music, videos, and other cultural products exchanged online are predominantly Chinese-speaking, there are also other cultural sources exchanged, including music and TV programmes from nearby Asian countries such as Japan and Korea, popular English-speaking TV series, and movies mostly from the United States. Popular P2P and video sharing sites among the informants include the P2P software PPStream, Xiaoli (<http://www.xiaolu.cc>), and YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>).
- 5 The event was advertised in Chinatown arts space (<http://www.chinatownartspace.com>), London Chinese community network (<http://www.chinese-network.net>), Spectrum Chinese community network (<http://www.pswu.com>), and the British Chinese community websites (www.dimsum.co.uk).

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