newtibet.com:

CITIZENSHIP AS AGENCY IN A VIRTUAL TIBETAN PUBLIC

TASHI RABGEY[1]

> Did you think that cutting off my tongue would make me give up thinking?
> People use their minds to think, not their tongues.
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> "Snowland Nomad"[2]

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2003, an audacious website surfaced on the Chinese-language Internet. Created by Tibetans inside the PRC, *newtibet.com* provided a provocative new forum for the public discussion of Tibet's contemporary predicament. While carefully declaring "the unity of China" as its first founding principle, *newtibet* also announced itself as supporting "the unity and autonomy of Tibet". From Lhasa to Shanghai and from Taipei to New York, Tibetans sat up and took notice of the irreverent discussion of taboo topics ranging from the failures of the current Tibetan élite to the meaning of "Tibet" itself. Within weeks, *newtibet* established itself as the premier virtual Tibet forum in Chinese-language cyberspace.

For a time, it appeared that digital technology had cleared a new discursive terrain for a self-conscious Tibetan public. The rise of the Chinese language Internet had, from the onset, enabled the proliferation of an astonishing number of public venues for the discussion of social issues. But until the appearance of *newtibet.com*,

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[1] This paper was prepared for the University of British Columbia's Institute of Asian Research conference, "Tibet and the Contemporary World", April 18-20th, 2004.

[2] "Xueyu muren" on *newtibet.com*, quoting from the novel *Chen ai luo ding* (published in English as *Red Poppies*) by the Tibetan writer Alai.

none had specifically positioned itself as a forum for the social critique of contemporary Tibet. As a portal to the Tibetan social world, *newtibet* opened a window to a densely articulated and contested cultural field, fueling speculation about the democratic potential of digital communication for Tibetans. Less than six months after its debut, however, *newtibet* abruptly disappeared, only to return some weeks later conspicuously attenuated.

This paper examines the social use of the forum during *newtibet*'s first unfettered months of online existence. In particular, it points to the ways in which the online discussions provide a new map of social relations amongst a wired Tibetan community. I draw on this map to explore the rationality underlying the discursive tactics used to define the normative boundaries of this public space. Locating the use of citizenship as a strategy for "negotiating the state" (Saich 2000: 124-141) on *newtibet*.com, this paper cautions against the invocation of a Habermasian public sphere in conceptualizing the new virtual Tibet arena in Chinese-language cyberspace. Instead, I consider the extent to which the model of civil society might provide a better diagnosis of the uncertain present. In light of this discussion, I conclude with some reflections on the challenges presented by this case study to the epistemic limits of our existing approaches toward the study of contemporary Tibet.

HABERMASOCHISM[3] ONLINE: RETHINKING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Yang Guobin has observed that the study of the Internet in China has been for the most part driven by an interest in issues of political control and political impact.[4] While the bulk of the analytic attention in this growing literature has been given to the specific mechanisms of state control of the Internet,[5] these studies have also pointed out that state control is far from absolute.[6] Indeed, Yang suggests that

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[3] I borrow this term from Dean 1999: 162.

[4] For his review of these studies, see Yang 2003a: 457 and Yang 2003c: 408-410.

[5] See, for example, Chase and. Mulvenon (2002), Harwit and Clark (2001), and Kalathil and Boas (2001).

[6] Chase and Mulvenon find that the Internet "will probably not bring 'revolutionary' political change to China, but instead will be a key pillar of China's slower, evolutionary path toward increased pluralization and possibly even nascent democratization" (2002: 90), cited in Yang 2003c: 408-9. Harwit and Clark conclude

Harwit and Clark's description of the state's ambivalence toward political controls signals a need for more scholarly attention to the question of the actual social uses of the Internet in China (2003a: 457). In his path breaking work on Chinese civil society and the Internet, Yang premises his studies on the insight that "the Chinese state is not an omnipotent entity, but has numerous permeable holes, not the least of which is the lack of interest or sincerity at the local level in implementing central policies" (2003a: 457). It is the expanding field of civic interaction engendered by the 'ambivalence' and 'permeability' of the state that Yang's work begins the task of charting.

I locate this study of the nascent Tibetan online public in a similar context. While the Chinese state no doubt exerts a constant presence throughout the entirety of Tibetan social life, this does not preclude the existence of interstices within which a degree of agency can be realized. But how should these spaces be conceptualized? In what ways, and to what extent, do different conceptual models circumscribe or constrain our ability to envision the dynamics of social relations? What becomes visible and what drops from the picture as we shift analytic frames? Notwithstanding a retrenchment in recent China scholarship from value-laden concepts such as public sphere and civil society, Yang argues for the continuing significance and utility of the conceptual framework of Habermas's normative theory. In a review of recent literature on civil society in China, Yang diagnoses a reticence among scholars toward the cross-cultural borrowing of concepts, but then concludes, "[w]hether the authors admit it or not, they are implicitly guided by the normative meanings of Habermas' concept".[7] While he seeks to use the notion of the public sphere "in the broadest and most innocuous sense possible" by construing it as "an open space for communication" (Yang 2003b: 470), Yang nonetheless frames his own work on the Chinese Internet in terms that are "essentially Habermasian" (2003b: 471).

"…in the short run, political controls will remain schizophrenic as the value of an open network conflicts with conservative political philosophies and as the nature of the Internet's audience makes it an unlikely tool for precipitating socially disruptive forces" (2001: 408), cited in Yang (2003a: 457).

    [7] "They may use alternative terms such as social space and public space, but they all imply that for the development of a Chinese civil society, it is better to have these spaces than not" (Yang 2002: 7).

Yang's invocation of this normative framework is part of a wider revival of interest in the notion of the public sphere that has accompanied the rise of the Internet. Much of the literature has been animated by a technological determinism that emphasizes the liberatory potential of computer-mediated information. In his critical reading of the optimism about the democratizing effects of virtual communication, Hubertus Buchstein notes that proponents such as Howard Rheingold find in Habermas "a normative justification" for their views because of the striking resemblance between his idealized theory of the public sphere and the modes of communication facilitated by the new digital medium.[8] Thus, Buchstein remarks, "if one accepts the claims of the optimists, the new technology seems to match all basic requirements of Habermas' normative theory of democratic public sphere: it is a universal, anti-hierarchical, complex and demanding mode of interaction. Because it offers universal access, uncoerced communication, freedom of expression, an unrestricted agenda, participation outside of traditional political institutions and generates public opinion through processes of discussion, the Internet looks like the most ideal speech situation" (1997: 251).

But in the rush to comment on the effects of the digital revolution, have we been too eager to arrive already equipped with the normative ground for our suppositions fully worked out? It is useful here to recall Judith Butler's cautionary remark, "To set the 'norms' of political life in advance is to prefigure the kinds of practices which will qualify as the political and it is to seek to negotiate politics outside of a history which is always to a certain extent opaque to us in the moment of action" (Butler 1995: 129, as cited in Dean 2001: 249). This insight provides important impetus in Jodi Dean's argument for jettisoning the notion of the public sphere altogether as the basis for conceptualizing networked interactions in cyberspace (2001: 247). As she explains, "to territorialize cyberia as the public sphere is to determine in advance what sort of engagements and identities are proper to the political and to use this determination to

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[8] Buchstein argues against the democratic promise of the Internet and points out the ways in which computer interaction might in fact "distort citizenship" and lead to a "privatization of politics" (Buchstein 1997 and Rheingold 1994: 274-280).

homogenize political engagement, neutralize social space, and sanitize popular cultures" (Dean 1997: 265-6; Dean 2001: 247).

Dean's argument begins with a critical reading of Habermas' account of the emergence and decline of the bourgeois public sphere in modern Europe. She points out that the ideal-typical model of the public sphere portrayed by Habermas "carries with it a set of norms which enable it both to secure itself against the state and to function as a terrain for critical-rational debate" (1996: 223). She foregrounds in particular the ideals of equality, reflexivity/accessibility and inclusivity as key conditions in the formation of Habermas' historically specific public sphere. These in turn serve as "the normative basis for his analysis of the infiltration of the public sphere by power" (1996: 224). At the center of Dean's critique of the Habermasian public sphere is an objection to this conceptualization of power. Habermas conceives the public sphere as a domain free from power, one that must be safeguarded against the intrusion of the state and economy. As such, his analysis fails to acknowledge the "presence of power within 'public' discourses" and leads to the notion that "the fallible results of public deliberations should enjoy the presumption of rationality" (1996: 234).

While other critics have sought to expand Habermas' initial formulation to encompass heterogeneous norms and competing rationalities by theorizing multiple spheres of differentiated publics,[9] Dean maintains that simply "adding an 's' to the public sphere" fails to account for the fact that exclusions will nonetheless always persist (1996: 233). Speaking in plural form thus fails to address the underlying problem that "the regulatory fiction of the public sphere privileges a theorization of political norms". That is, the very notion of the public sphere requires an abstraction of norms in order to establish the boundaries of the domain. In contrast, civil society— more strongly a relational than a spatial concept—points to networks of interactions that take place throughout the social field. As such, power operates differently in these two models. The privileging of norms in the public sphere has the effect of theorizing power as

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[9] For example, Nancy Fraser puts forth the notion of "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser 1993: 14) and Seyla Benhabib suggests "a non-unitary and dispersed network of publics" (Benhabib 1994: 41). Habermas himself later revised his initial formulation to reflect, *inter alia*, the exclusion of women; see for example, Habermas 1992: 426.

external to the deliberative public (though potentially encroaching), while the privileging of interaction in civil society has the potential of conceptualizing power as diffuse and dispersed within and throughout relationships. Indeed, drawing on Cohen and Arato, Dean argues for a notion of civil society that is "always imbricated with power", one that "acknowledges the inequalities, exclusions, and competing rationalities characteristic of networked societies" (2001: 250). Dean's notion of civil society thus points to "the concrete institutions in which the subjects of politics come to practice, mediate, and represent their actions as political" (2001:247).

The argument put forth by Dean and Buchstein on the inadequacy of the concept of the public sphere stems largely from an interest in networked interactions taking place in largely democratic cultural contexts. In what follows, I consider this critique in light of the tensions and solidarities that arose when a digital public space for critical discussion was forged within a distinctly *non*-democratic cultural context.

ENTERING THE VIRTUAL TIBETAN PUBLIC

Late one Saturday morning, I accompanied Kesang[10] as she left the crowded dormitory room she shares with five Chinese classmates and headed for the solitude of an Internet café. There she slipped on earphones and entered a chatroom known to be a favored haunt of Tibetan students. She began typing in Chinese.

Kesang:	Are there any Tibetans out there?
	[Five positive responses. Kesang selects "Jiu Jiu".]
Kesang:	Are you really Tibetan?
"Jiu Jiu":	Yes.
Kesang:	Say something in Tibetan then.
"Jiu Jiu":	*Jia ba suo!* [Tibetan for "Go eat shit!", improvised in Chinese characters]

Several rapid-fire exchanges later, Jiu Jiu established his nationality credentials to Kesang's satisfaction and the two turned on their mikes

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[10] All personal names have been altered.

to start chatting in Tibetan. They discovered they were both from the central Tibetan region and were now in college in distant Chinese cities. Through 'QQ' instant messaging, they called on other online acquaintances to join and soon they were a party of five virtual friends—disembodied Tibetans scattered across China—swapping news, music and accounts of collegiate angst late into the afternoon.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

For those wired onto the Internet, digital technology has brought not only unprecedented access to information but also a new means of creating networks of relationships with those who would otherwise be strangers. For Tibetans, the significance of this technological innovation is particularly striking because of the limits that have been imposed over public communication and expression in Tibetan-speaking areas during the post-Mao era. Indeed, while there has been a rapid expansion of economic reforms in Tibet since the 1980s, the scope for public discussion and open exchange of ideas has in fact diminished markedly over time. Thus, for example, in the early 1980s, the revival of print media and the development of modern Tibetan literature[11] generated a burst of intellectual energy and provided the impetus for the first critical discussion of questions concerning the problem of modernity and Tibetan cultural change. But as Tsering Shakya notes, political constraints on Tibetan writers heightened after 1994, undermining the innovation and originality that marked the first wave of iconoclastic writers led by the likes of Dondrub Gyal.[12]

Likewise, the 'sweet tea houses' (*ja mngar mo*)[13] of Lhasa had lost their role as spaces for public discussion and open debate by the early 1990s. Throughout the 1980s, sweet tea houses had served as important gathering places for Tibetans to exchange news, air

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[11] It is noticeable that Tibetans were for the most part absent from a number of the important literary movements of the early 1980s, such as *shangheng wenxue* (scar literature) and *fansi wenxue* (reflection literature).

[12] For an account of this development, see Shakya (2000). See also Hartley 2003: 292-301 and Stoddard (1994).

[13] The term *ja mngar mo*, literally 'sweet tea', has also come to signify 'sweet tea houses' in the local Lhasa vernacular. The other common term is *ja khang*.

opinions and discuss ideas. From late morning until early afternoon, these sites, dotted around the old town of Lhasa, would swell with animated talk as Tibetans crowded around various tables to participate in ongoing discussions. Certain establishments, and even certain tables, were known for the discussion of particular themes and topics, ranging from issues as broad as international affairs to those as narrow as the financial concerns of truck drivers. With the tightening of political controls in the early 1990s, however, this unusual space of lively, open debate was brought to an end through constant surveillance. The encroachment of the state into even these marginal spaces seemed to militate against the possibility of any form of meaningful public communication and the open expression of critical ideas.[14]

By the late 1990s, however, the effects of the state's longer-term economic and social strategies conspired to give rise to an entirely new form of Tibetan public space. First, the mandate to improve China's long-term growth and international competitiveness provided the momentum for a massive expansion of network infrastructure between 1993 and 1996 (Hartford 2000: 255–6). The full-scale wiring of China was thus less a product of private sector considerations than of "a state-centric strategy" for comprehensively advancing information technology (Hartford 2000: 256). Since opening to the public in 1996, the number of Internet users has climbed exponentially, reaching 79.5 million in 2003. According to the January 2004 survey of the China Information Network Center (CNNIC), there were by then 86,000 Internet users in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and 195,000 in the province of Qinghai.[15] These numbers indicate that there are substantial numbers of Tibetans who are now part of the networked community.

Second, the possibility of an alternative Tibetan public space has also been a function of China's education policy. Among the new

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[14] For an account of underground Tibetan dissident writing, see Sperling 1994.

[15] Since provincial figures are not broken down to the Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties, it is not possible to ascertain even approximate figures for the numbers of users in Tibetan-speaking areas of Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai. According to CNNIC figures in January 2004 (regarded as inflated by industry monitors), Internet users were then reported to represent 3.2% of the TAR population and 3.7% of the Qinghai population. The use of Chinese further limits the potential reach of *newtibet*. It is difficult to estimate the actual readership of *newtibet*, but in absolute terms it was likely to have been small.

Tibetan Internet users are a large group of young Tibetans who had been sent *en masse* to be educated in Chinese cities from middle school onward as part of a special program launched in 1985. Unlike the older generation of Tibetan élites, these young Tibetans (the oldest cohort is now in their early thirties) did not experience the trauma of Tibet's annexation or the psychological devastation of the Cultural Revolution. Born after 1972, these Tibetans were brought up in a Chinese-ruled Tibet, but one in which there was a minor renaissance of Tibetan cultural identity and a new awareness of a political struggle being waged in their name. Immersed from the age of twelve in a Chinese-language environment, these Tibetans now demonstrate a facility in Chinese that, as a group, surpasses the abilities of previous generations. Since the program was initiated nearly two decades ago, many thousands of young Tibetans have been trained and educated under these circumstances. This new generation now constitutes the first critical mass of fully bilingual and bicultural Tibetans.

A New Tibet Online

When *newtibet* first appeared online in spring 2003, it electrified the Chinese-reading online Tibetan world. Chatrooms buzzed with news of the forum and for weeks an engrossed Tibetan audience sat riveted before their computer screens following the daily discussions. Although other PRC-based online discussion groups on Tibet had surfaced in the past—some attracting lively debate and thoughtful discussions—none had been part of a website devoted entirely to the subject of Tibet and certainly none had been specially designed around the concept of a new vision for Tibet's future. It was a concept that caught on quickly. The website gathered a devoted following with at least 460 readers formally registering as members in just its first few weeks of existence. At one point, the forum reached a peak of 230 posts onto the bulletin board in a single day and in mid-July, six thousand pieces of information were available on the site. It appeared that many Tibetans were actually beginning to jostle to have their say in public while many more were drawing in closer to listen.

The Ugly Tibetan: Online Social Critique

What attracted much of the online readership to *newtibet* was the trenchant social critique that appeared on its bulletin board. While many of the postings were short, disjointed comments reacting to ongoing discussions, some offered lengthy and provocative pieces, apparently written with some forethought and planning, that could be read as individual essays. As a lens into the social world of a younger generation of Tibetans educated in Chinese, this body of writing reveals a deep sense of malaise about the contemporary Tibetan predicament. In particular, many of the writers diagnose a cultural crisis in the decline of Tibetan language use among educated youth, their troubling sense of historical disorientation, the widening socio-economic inequalities among Tibetans in general, and a general sense of despondency at their own inability to address these social problems. Some look to structural explanations for the current conditions and to the problem of modernity in particular. One commentator went so far as to blame the fact that "…the so-called autonomous government hasn't been democratically elected by the people".

Others turn to the role of individuals. This was perhaps most memorably raised in a piece entitled *The Ugly Tibetan*. Following in the footsteps of Bo Yang (1992) and others before him, the writer launches an excoriating critique of the Tibetan intellectual élite (*zhishi jingying*), admonishing them for failing to rise up to their responsibilities at this critical juncture in Tibetan history. The piece begins by reviewing the role of key figures among the educated élite of other nations, such as Gandhi, in times of crisis. The writer then asks about the lack of leadership among Tibetans:

> What about Tibetans? I know the 13th Dalai Lama tried to carry out innovative reforms. But his title was twice taken away and today there are some authorities who believe him to have been "pro-British" and suspect him of "treachery". I know Gendun Choephel founded the "Tibet Revolutionary Party" and that he sought the Tibetan people's unification and prosperity. But having been sold by the British and India, he was destroyed by his own people's system and bureaucrats. I also know there was an exceptional poet born in Amdo, Tibet (*Xizang Anduo*). He quietly hummed a sad song: "*Zhong ren jie zui, wo du xing*" (Everyone is drunk, only I am sober). In the end he tried to use

his own life to awaken his nation still deep in sleep.[16] There is still one other. In all the world, who doesn't know you? There are so many people in this world. It is only because of him that they know there is a "Tibet" that exists. But as a Tibetan, I do not have the freedom to speak his name. Besides these people? Who can give a fifth example? No, give me an example of a contemporary intellectual. Is there one?

In this polemic, the "Ugly Tibetan" is characterized as myopic, selfish and greedy, turning a blind-eye to social problems while enjoying a life of self-interested pursuits and entertainment. After being educated among the Chinese, the Ugly Tibetan returns to Tibet to join the official class, taking the largest share of income and benefits, and ignoring the needs and interests of the people. The educated élite are meant to be "Tibet's soul, spokesperson (*houshe*), soldier (*zhanshi*) and leader". Instead:

The reality? The reality is that those monks and nuns who sit in ancient monasteries, high up in remote mountains, reading scriptures and practicing the *dharma*, they care more about our people than the educated élite. Those merchants from Ngaba who travel north and south, relying on selling Tibetan knives and fake medicine in order to make a living, they have a greater awareness of our people than this educated élite. Those nomads and farmers of Amdo, who live on the edge of Tibet and must carry the heaviest burden in resisting assimilation, they love our people more than the educated élite. Those in exile who have had to leave their country and whose view of their homeland is now blocked by the fierce Himalayas, they have more loyalty and faith in our people than the educated élite.

The writer continues by saying that until this élite class of educated Tibetans begins to take responsibility for the interests of the Tibetan people and the needs of human freedom,

…I am going to continue to call them Ugly Tibetans! They are people without ideas, people who do not seek to liberate their minds, an educated class who are forsaking their mission and striving only for their own self-interests, who toss away their responsibilities and throw the burden of our nation onto the poor and the uneducated, the nomads

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[16] This is a reference to the writer Dondrub Gyal, often regarded as the founder of modern Tibetan literature. His 1983 poem *Waterfall of Youth* (see Shakya 2000: 9-13) marked an important milestone in Tibetan contemporary thought. He committed suicide in 1985.

> and the farmers, and keep all the glory and benefit of the nation for themselves. Now how ugly is this?

These biting comments touched a nerve with the online readership. *The Ugly Tibetan* elicited an overwhelmingly positive response, with one admirer cutting and pasting favored excerpts and re-posting them back on to the bulletin board as a "best of" collection, and with "thank you!" appended to the end. Instead of seeking to explain or defend the interests of the Tibetan élite, the participants gave their resounding approval of this scathing critique and applauded the ethical standpoint of the writer. The reflexivity to which this piece gave rise is significant because the participants are themselves most likely to become part of the official élite the writer is taking to task. But is this social critique and critical reflection tantamount to reasoned discussion and debate? If not, where are the limits of reason and how are these boundaries maintained? What exactly does rationality look like in this new Tibetan public?

High Voltage Wires: Citizenship and the Limits of Rationality

After the first month of its online existence, *newtibet's* webmaster sought feedback from readers about the appropriate nature and function of *newtibet's* forum. In the stream of commentary that issued forth, some participants asserted the need to keep 'the political' at bay while others worried out loud about the public discussion of 'sensitive' issues. Many invoked the primacy of 'rationality'. Weighing in on the matter, the webmaster himself emphasized that the discussions in *newtibet* should be governed by "reason" (*lixing*), that they should be "fair and impartial" (*gongzheng*) and be conducted through "reasoned argumentation"' (*shuoli*). He elaborated, "If we use rational means of discussion and argumentation, then there is no such thing as a 'sensitive' issue and there is nothing we can't discuss or investigate".

   While firmly appropriating a discourse of rationality and adopting a Habermasian conception of a public space that is 'free from power', the participants on *newtibet* nonetheless revealed an anxiety about inadvertently treading near the limits of that rationality. In the case of *newtibet*, the boundaries of acceptable public discourse lay at the threshold of Tibet's political status. These boundaries are managed in part by filters that automatically delete certain characters and replace

them with asterisks. At least in the first months of its existence, these included, for example, 'Dalai', and 'Jiang Zemin'. In part, the boundaries are maintained by bulletin board moderators, called *banzhu*, who monitor the discussions and delete any messages deemed inappropriate. A third means of patrolling the boundaries is through self-censorship. In the wake of several arrests made on Internet use charges (unrelated to *newtibet*), an appeal was made to *newtibet* participants to remember the grave consequences of the national security laws: they were urged to use caution and not go near the two "high voltage wires" (*gaoyaxian*) of the crime of state subversion and the crime of undermining national unity.

The challenge for *newtibet* has been to carve out a public space for critical reflection and discussion that does not threaten to stray near those high voltage wires. For the *newtibet* forum, citizenship, as an acknowledgement of the legal—that is to say, legitimate—relationship of both the individual and the collective to the state, has been proffered as the guarantor of that rationality. This was established, for example, through the founding principles of the website, which included both a formal commitment to the unity of China and recognition of the central government's authority.

Despite these proactive affirmations, however, the uncertainty surrounding precisely where the boundaries of reasonable discussion might materialize in actual practice has led to discursive struggles online. In one incident, 'P' appeared to approach a boundary of acceptable speech by posting a strongly worded nationalistic message (the actual meaning is unclear because a key word was filtered out). 'A' responded by stating, "You might have these thoughts in your heart, but don't express them here". In response to both of these, 'B' admonished Tibetans for "living in a fantasy" and, using asterisks and circumlocutions, stated that even the Dalai Lama was no longer speaking of independence, so they had better stop doing so as well. As the discussion threatened to become unruly, the webmaster stepped in and pointed out that no one had spoken of independence, and he asked that B "not put words into other people's mouths", lest others outside the discussion misinterpret the intent of *newtibet*. This incident underlines, first, that the managers of *newtibet* are committed to the principle of the unity of the state; and second, that the arbitrariness of the discursive boundaries in *practice* means that participants in public conversations—even those who are committed

to the official discourse of citizenship and the state—might find themselves unwittingly engaged in political struggles over meaning and intent. That is to say, notwithstanding the appropriation of normative theory, the terrain of the public space is always already infiltrated by power.

Greater Tibet: Citizenship as Agency

In an autobiographical essay, a writer calling himself "Soul of Tibet" provides a set of reflections on his journey from rural Kham to urban China. His narrative recounts the changes in his political consciousness as he struggled to make sense of the shifting political landscape of his life. As a privileged child of Tibetan Party officials, he was oblivious to politics until he was sent to middle school, where he first encountered Tibetans from other Tibetan-speaking regions. There he first began to see himself as a Khampa. For high school, he was sent away to study among the Chinese and for the first time became conscious of being Tibetan. In his account, his journey of self-discovery took him from childhood naïveté to an angry, impassioned nationalism and, finally, to a thoughtful, rational adulthood. In the course of making peace with his complex political reality, he finds his own path to "Tibet"—one that is anchored in the Chinese state—and now sees it as his mission to articulate to the Chinese the Tibetan predicament and demand dignity (*zunyan*) for the Tibetan nation.

In this account, two dimensions of citizenship can be distinguished. First, in the story of how the writer reconciles his subordination to the Chinese state (and hence becomes a 'good citizen'), citizenship manifests as a form of subjection—both in the sense of becoming a subject of, and of being subjected to, the state. Second, in the story of how the writer discovers a new political mission in the name of "Tibet", citizenship manifests as a form of agency—that is to say, it emerges as a basis of political action. In this sense, the legitimation of the individual's relationship to the state through the notion of citizenship gives rise to a formative, or productive, power. This double dimension of citizenship corresponds to what Judith Butler (1997) calls "the paradox of subjection": the notion that the agency of the subject is an effect of its subordination. Thus, while as a form of subjection, citizenship situates the

individual within a state-centric field of legal rationality, as a form of agency, citizenship becomes a tactic for "negotiating the state" (Saich 2000).

In the case of *newtibet*, the negotiation of the state within a discourse of citizenship materialized in the explorations of the meaning of the term *Xizang* ("Tibet"). In particular, one of the dominant themes that recurred in the online discussions was the need to expand the semantic range of *Xizang* to include all Tibetan-speaking peoples. The promotion of this idea was an act of political agency, because the norm within the existing official discourse is for *Xizang* to refer only to the Tibet Autonomous Region, a political entity that (according to the official population census) includes less than half of all the Tibetan-speaking people in the PRC. In the discussions on *newtibet*, an effort was made to return to what are conventionally regarded as traditional Tibetan political categories. Indeed, the traditional framework was built into the premise of the original website itself, as the specific topic forums corresponded to Tibetan conceptualizations of the provinces and regions. Thus, the four main forums were divided as follows:[17]

1. U-Tsang, Land of Dharma: Holy Land of Dark-Haired Tibetans—Lhasa!
2. Kham, Land of People: Descendants of the Great Ling Gesar of the Heroic Epic
3. Amdo, Land of Horses: In the Footsteps of Gendun Choephel, Using Wisdom and Courage to Awaken the Lakes of Snow Mountains
4. Gyalrong, Land of Fire: Calling from Mo'erdo Mountain and *Jiuzhaigou*

It is a paradox of power that the logic of the state—through its bureaucratic classificatory notion of *Zangzu* ("Tibetan nationality")—creates the possibility of positing an expanded field of meaning for the concept of *Xizang* itself, one to which all *Zangzu* can legitimately belong. For *newtibet*, citizenship therefore functions not only as a limit to rationality, but also as a site of political

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[17] Significantly, a fifth forum—entitled "Tibetan Brothers Abroad: How are You Faring in Other People's Lands?"—was dedicated to discussions about exiled Tibetans. This points to a sense of solidarity with Tibetans outside Tibet, and an interest in exploring a pan-Tibetan identity more generally.

contestation. In so doing, it provides an account of power that illuminates the pervasiveness of its circulation while exposing its permeability in practice.

CONCLUSIONS

When I asked a young Tibetan friend in Beijing about the extraordinary buzz about *newtibet*, she explained, "It's the first time we saw the truth written down". Hers was a typical response. At the same time, however, others were considerably less impressed. "What's so new about *newtibet*?" one interlocutor asked, "We talk about these things all the time in [literary] Tibetan". His comment pointed to a linguistically generated cultural fault line: those who do not read Chinese comfortably might fail to recognize the significance of the new virtual forum, while those who do not read Tibetan might fail to appreciate that a tradition of social critique—albeit often veiled in allegorical terms—has been maintained in the pages of Tibetan literary journals and in an expanding body of independent self-published Tibetan-language literature.

But in contrast to the highbrow, cloistered air of much of the Tibetan-language social criticism, what distinguished *newtibet* as a novel development was its very heightened sense of *publicity*. Within the circumscribed boundaries of the digital divide, it made a transparent appeal for mass participation and readership. Rather than deliberately obscuring critique for a rarefied audience, the point of *newtibet* appeared to be to create "a space of sociability"—not unlike Arendt's account of Varnhagen's salon—in which the "desire for difference and distinctness could assume an intersubjective reality" (Benhabib 1995: 17). That is to say, *newtibet* had been formed with the specific intent to create a space of "visibility and self-expression", one which individuals could enter in order to "be seen, heard, noticed by others" (1995:17). The fact that the forum was mediated onscreen through the Chinese language underlines this drive for visibility. Thus, what was new about *newtibet* was that it deliberately drew attention to itself—and in doing so, invited a new gaze. As one participant offered, "If we speak from a rational perspective, we can communicate our nation's malaise to more people. By opening up to the public, it will allow more people to

understand us". The forum of *newtibet* thus offered a way to *publicize* a set of interests and differences in order to be better understood.

While users of the forum themselves appropriated the tropes of reason and impartiality in characterizing their discussions, this new drive for public expression and visibility was in fact narrowly circumscribed by the constraints of a stringent legal rationality. Delimited by 'high voltage wires', the online discussions maneuvered anxiously around that which might be construed as 'political'—thereby ensuring that a particular politics was embedded within and throughout the conversations. This penetration of power throughout the discursive space of *newtibet* contradicts the Habermasian idealization of the public sphere and calls instead for a model of normativity that acknowledges, as does Dean's notion of civil society, the reproduction of power along networks of relationships throughout the social order. What is significant about the new online public space, therefore, was not so much the particular form and framework of the deliberations taking place, but rather the fact that these public conversations were taking place at all. This self-conscious *public expression* of Tibetan social critique and commentary suggests that there could be more room for Tibetan political discussion and reflection than has largely been presumed until now.

Digital technology has been of paramount importance to this sudden new drive for visibility. Just as twenty years ago the advent of print media and literary journals created a new self-consciousness among Tibetans and triggered a burst of interest in self-expression and social critique, the recent arrival of the Internet has heightened the self-awareness and reflexivity of an entirely new generation of Tibetans. Indeed, this new cultural moment is potentially even more significant because of the speed and physical reach of computer-mediated information. The discussions on *newtibet* during its first months of existence revealed an acute dissatisfaction with the current Tibetan élite as well as a collective vision for Tibet that encompasses all Tibetan-speaking areas. The Internet accelerated the development of these positions by collapsing physical space and bringing Tibetans in Beijing, Lhasa and Labrang into a single conversation. The exchange of information and the articulation of new ideas facilitated by the new virtual forum foregrounded the incongruities in the

normative standards across the Tibetan and Chinese social worlds and made possible a critique of these discrepant realities.

When *newtibet* returned back online in November 2003, it had become *Zhongguo Xin Xizang* (China's New Tibet) and the forums were no longer freely open to the public. The bulletin board, in fact, was now open to readers by invitation only. The window of free space—at least for the time being—had come to a close.[18] But the brief surge of impassioned public conversation and critique left Tibet scholars and commentators to reconsider established conventions and practices in the study of contemporary Tibet. It provoked reflection, for example, on the consequences of taking as an object of inquiry a society that is under constant surveillance—one in which public space is perpetually displaced. That is to say, how can the problem of representation be accounted for in the absence of a speaking public? To what extent, if at all, is it possible to transcend the uncertainties and silences engendered by political constraints? And, at the very least, in what ways can our research and writing be reoriented so that the epistemic limits of our scholarship can be adequately acknowledged?

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[18] Tibet-focused websites on the Chinese-language Internet began to proliferate after the writing of this paper. Discussions that first broke ground in *newtibet.com* eventually found their way into disparate corners of websites such as *www.tibetcul.com*. Tibetan-language websites also began to draw an animated readership.

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