



State of the Art

Women's online participation and the transformation of citizenship

Ip Iam Chong and Lam Oi Wan
China

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The **Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society** (CITIGEN) research programme, launched in 2010, aims to explore the notion of marginalised women's citizenship as a normative project or as an aspiration for equitable social membership contained in the promise of an emerging techno-social order. Six research partners from Sri Lanka, Philippines, China, Thailand/Taiwan, Bangladesh and India are studying various aspects of the terrain. Also three eminent scholars of the field from Costa Rica, Pakistan and Thailand, are writing think pieces delving into the research subject from their perspectives to further enrich the research process.

The **State of the Art** is an analysis of the current state of the field researched. It includes a literature review, based on the hypothesis developed in the research proposal.

Authors

Ip Iam Chong is teaching at the Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University (Hong Kong). He is one of the founders of Hong Kong In-Media – an important online independent media platform in Hong Kong which was created six years ago to promote a more participatory media through new information technology in response to the political and economic crisis. Last year, they published a book titled *Info-rhizome: Report on Independent Media in the Chinese-speaking World* to cover these new developments. As women's voices are not yet easy to hear in the field of new media, they have been recruiting more women as contributing reporters, providing them training and a platform for sharing their skill and information. Recently, Chong has shifted his research interest to media studies.

Lam Oi Wan is currently a freelance editor at www.globalvoicesonline.org, a website providing voice to grassroots citizen media and helping them reach a global audience. She has been a student activist and has worked as a journalist for a few years with a focus on political news, in particular the political transformation of Hong Kong from British colony into SAR of China. From 1997 to 2000, she worked as an Alternative Education Programme Officer in an NGO called Asian Regional Exchange. She then attended the International Woman University under the migrant program in Hanover in 2000 and moved to Taiwan to work as Managing Editor for an academic journal - *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* for three years. She re-entered the Beijing Tsinghua University for her M.Phil in Sociology from 2002-2005 and co-founded Hong Kong In-Media and www.inmediahk.net with a number of local activists in Hong Kong in 2004.

Women's online participation and the transformation of citizenship – A state of the art analysis of China

Ip Iam Chong and Lam Oi Wan

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Introduction

Against the background of the shift in the socio-technological paradigm, this study attempts to explore the dynamics of the insurgency of the multiple counter and alternative public spheres in the context of Chinese societies characterised by authoritarianism and post-colonial power equations. It focuses on women's organisations and activists, their uses of new media and online platforms and their implications for citizenship.

1. Public sphere and counterpublics

Habermas (1989) develops his idea of 'bourgeois public sphere' from his discussion on the European history of Enlightenment in late 18th and 19th century. According to his conception, the bourgeois public sphere is a series of platforms, such as newspapers, salons, coffee houses, town hall assemblies, etc. for mediating the contradiction between the bourgeois (private) and *citoyen* (public) to discover common interests and reach societal consensus. It is an institutionalised arena for the civil society to negotiate with the State.

The degeneration of the bourgeois public sphere, according to Habermas, is a result of the rise of mass society in the late capitalist period. The corporate-controlled mass media has turned critical and rational debates in the public sphere into objects of consumption. The active subject of citizen has turned into a passive consumer of news, opinions and informations and subjected to the manipulation of polls and public relation experts. To rescue the ideal public sphere from the control of the rich and the powerful, Habermas switches his focus from the socio-historical and institutional analysis to a theory of language and formulates a universal and formalistic process of public communication mediating the public spheres. Such a process of 'deliberative democracy' is designed to cultivate rational and moral subjects through reflection, argumentation, reasoning and building consensus.

However, the assumption that participants could 'bracket' their social identity 'as if' they are equal and that they could be rational and impartial in their deliberation about the common good has been criticised by feminists. Indeed, the 'bracketing' of one's social identity would silence the

marginalised groups whose values and concerns are excluded from the common 'we' in political deliberation, thereby perpetuating a subtle form of social control (Jane, 1990).

Habermas' idealisation of public sphere, that was based on the western male dominant bourgeois experience, has been widely criticised for its underestimation of the significance of oppositional and alternative public spheres, such as those of proletarian and women as political forces. With an emphasis on experience, Negt and Kluge (1993) compare the bourgeois and proletarian public sphere and challenge Habermas' singular and universal construction of public sphere and introduce the notion of oppositional public sphere. Geoff Eley (1987) studies the development associations and societies in England and Germany in the 19th century and argues that the emerging civil society and its public sphere were the training ground for the bourgeois class which had excluded the plebeian strata. Feminists join in the debate and Joan Landes (1988) points out that the construction of the ethos of the new republican public sphere in France marginalised the more feminine salon culture and eventually excluded women from political participation. Built upon Negt and Kluge's account of political experience, Rita Felski (1989) argues that the notion of public sphere cannot be detached from multiple subjective experiences. Her idea of public sphere or counterpublic, unlike Habermas' notion, does not claim a representative universality but offers a critique of cultural values from a marginalised subject position. Mary Ryan's (1990) study of Northern American women associations also demonstrates the existence of a plurality of competing publics, i.e. the counterpublics contesting with the bourgeois public.

Nancy Fraser points out that subordinated social groups - women, workers, peoples of colour, and gays and lesbians - have been active in constituting subaltern counterpublics for inventing and circulating counterdiscourses among their members. She argues that the subaltern counterpublics have a dual character in stratified societies - they are spaces of withdrawal and regroupment, as well as bases and training groups for negotiating with the dominant publics and reclaiming 'the public-at-large' (Fraser, 1990: 67-68). The public spheres are arenas for contestation rather than deliberation. In fact, the boundary of public and private has to be renegotiated through discursive contestation. For example, domestic violence, sexual orientation and reproductive rights have been framed as public agendas through feminist discourses and also

as analyses of the power relation and systematic exploitation of the male-dominated and homophobic societies.

Fraser's subaltern counterpublics are mainly platforms of contestation sustained by the civil society and independent from the state. They are the so-called 'weak publics' as their deliberative practice is confined to opinion-formation rather than decision making. With the emergence of parliamentary sovereignty, the line between civil society and the state has been blurred and Fraser calls the discursive authorisation of the use of state power in the parliaments 'strong publics'. The 'strong publics', as a form of elite politics, are sustained by institutional design and regulation. The interaction between the 'strong' and 'weak' publics requires further theorisation.

2. New media technology and new forms of activism

With the rapid development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), technology optimists, such as Rheingold (1993), believe that virtual communities in the Internet can serve as e-agera for deliberative practices. Without the spatial boundary, it can include as many participants as possible, and the identities of the participants are 'bracketed' because of the anonymity of the participants. Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) examines various online deliberative democracy projects and finds that most of the independent deliberative platforms have been marginalised by commercial platforms for information consumption. He also measures the performance in the deliberative platforms with Habermas' set of criteria in democratic communication and suggests that active interventions, in terms of both technological setup and administrative management, are needed in order to maintain a deliberative platform.

On the other hand, Mark Poster (1995) questions if the notion of public sphere is useful in understanding political practices within the realm of the Internet, given that machine mediation of people's communication is becoming so pervasive that the distinctions between the private and the public, market and state, and government and civil society, become blurred. The conceptual boundary of Habermas' public sphere, can no longer be maintained. Poster argues that the function of public sphere has been replaced by online communities, which are not platform for validity claims or critical reasoning, but virtual spaces for fashioning one's identity. He appropriates Donna Haraway's idea of 'cyborg' to describe the condition and experience of

'electronic beings', a new space of democratisation of subject constitution characterised by interactivity, decentering and diversity.

Instead of celebrating the liberating effect of technology brought to the individual subjectivity, Kellner (2000) looks into the power dimension of technology, which like capital, is a new form of power in the reproduction of social relations which structure all kinds of public sphere. In alignment with Kellner's concern, Manuel Castells (2007) turns towards communication studies and argues that the Internet has brought about a historical shift in the concept of public sphere—from the institutional realm to the new communication space. The transformation of ICTs has extended the reach of communication media to all domains of social life in a global network. As a result, the contestations between power and counter-power are increasingly taking place in the communication field. Moreover, Castells believes that the emergence of social media or the so-called 'mass self-communication' offers an extraordinary medium for social movements and activists to build their autonomy and confront the institutions (Castells, 2007: 249) in the form of counterpublics.

Juris and Pleyers' ethnographic fieldwork (2009) on young global justice activists from 1999 to 2007 shows how an alternative mode of cultural and political practice facilitated by ICTs is emerging. New ICTs allow activists to simultaneously maintain horizontal, peer-to-peer contacts and a widely participatory structure where diverse individuals, organisations, collectives and networks converge. Siapera's study (2005) on refugee counterpublics provides an empirical case of the contestation between the power and counter-power in their online and offline practices, which involve the formation of a cultural identity and a set of commonalities among the minority group, and facilitate active dialogue with the public through other media outlets.

3. Women's movement

In spite of the rich body of feminists' criticism and contribution to the debate on Habermas' idea of public sphere, the global women's movement, dominated by the Western feminist agenda, has been mainly engaging in the struggles for equal citizenship rights and socio-economic opportunities as the necessary conditions for women's participation in representative democracy and its various institutions and public spheres.

Since the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action at the UN Women conference, gender mainstreaming, based upon the Amsterdam Treaty on the principle of gender equality in all European Union (EU) activities, has become a common agenda in the global women's movement. Similar to the EU treaty, this agenda calls for the incorporation of a gender equality perspective in all policies at all levels and at all stages of policy making. By definition, gender mainstreaming refers to engaging women in political institutions. In the actual implementation of the principle, it usually induces a top-down approach, such as the introduction of equal opportunity acts and anti-discrimination legislation, for creating a mechanism and machinery for strengthening gender equality (Sainsbury and Bergqvist, 2009). Under the above strategy, women's organisations are increasingly absorbed into the institutionalised public sphere for the deliberation of social policies, such as government advisory bodies and women and family affair committees, etc.

The principle of gender mainstreaming has been developed in a context where institutional democracy is well-established, while most of the third world countries are situated in different political systems. The collaboration of women's organisations with undemocratic or (post)authoritarian states has very different implications as compared to their western counterpart.

For example, in reviewing the development of the Latin American feminist NGO boom of the 1990s, Alvarez (1998) points out that such international norm integrated with neo-liberal policies and political democratisation reform has shifted the terrain of local gender politics from “an expansive, polycentric, heterogeneous discursive field of action which spans into a vast array of cultural, social and political arenas” into professional feminist organisations specialising in gender policy assessment, project execution and social services delivery. The shift is “a modification of an anti-statist posture toward (sic) a critical-negotiating posture in relation to the State and formal international areas”. The practice of women's citizenship is oriented more towards negotiating with the government for women's institutional citizen rights, rather than engaging in oppositional politics that addresses the fundamental social injustice experienced by multitude of social minorities. This tendency is found particularly problematic in the countries under authoritarian regimes.

For instance, when addressing the gender issues in the information society, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, under the principle of gender mainstreaming, presented two strategic objectives - to increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication; to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media (Jensen, 2006). In the actual implementation of the objectives, the key concerns are government policy and women's employment in the ICTs sector. The Beijing to Beijing +5 secretary-general report stresses:

“Governments do not seem to exert meaningful control or influence in respect of the promotion of equality, or the eradication of stereotypes, violence against women, pornography and other degrading images. Still more must be done in the area of information and media to promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in policies and programmes.” (201)

“[W]omen have been slow to enter ICTs-based professions worldwide and have been largely excluded from designing and shaping information technologies. Where women are employed in this sector, they tend to hold low-paying and less prestigious positions. Traditionally, gender differences and disparities have been ignored in policies and programmes dealing with the development and dissemination of improved technologies. As a result, women have benefited less from, and been disadvantaged more by, technological advances.” (295)

The evaluation of the implementation of Beijing +5 on 'Gender, media and ICTs' looks at the new media and the ICTs sector as social institutions rather than a political domain for different counter-powers to negotiate with each other and contest the dominant force in the wider public. It results in a statist orientation, demanding the government to formulate a set of gender-sensitive rules and policies for women to enter the field. Such strategy drives women's organisations away from oppositional politics and radical practices in the Internet public, a domain for experimenting identity, alternative culture and contestation of citizenship rights, duties and opportunities.

4. New media and citizenship

The rise of new Internet media helped the development of a citizen movement based on direct participation.

Kahn and Kellner (2005) trace the history of online activism back to the community media movement which has been advocating public access television, community and low power radio, and public use of ICTs since the 1960s. With the development of online content management and RDF Site Summary (RSS) subscription system, individuals who have access to the Internet can easily build their own media. Indeed, activists and oppositional political groups have attempted to develop online alternative media since the mid 1990s. In the context of the United States, the anti-global capitalist movement which debuted from the 1999 anti-World Trade Organisation (WTO) mobilisation in Seattle and the anti-war movement since the September 11 attacks, rely very much on online independent and alternative media. Social minorities, citizen and human rights groups, feminists, media and cultural activists are competing with commercial, dominant political forces and mainstream media in the shaping of the Internet public sphere and its governance.

The Internet serves as a 'contested terrain' for the ongoing struggle of citizenship, which by definition is “a concept that cannot possibly satisfy everyone, meaning that this drawing of borders and creation of rights, duties, and opportunities comes into being as a result of struggles, causing or being likely to cause disagreement and disputes among people with different views” (Lombardo and Verloo, 2009: 109). Citizen journalism or grassroots participatory journalism (Gillmor, 2004) and social movement media (Atton, 2003), facilitated by the development of new media technology, are attempts to get hold of the representative and interpretative power in defining the social and the political, either by engaged report or by online mobilisation.

In term of feminist practices, the intersection of gender, class, race/ethnicity and sexual orientation has complicated the very definition of gender equality and citizen rights. The building of solidarity among women across different cultural and social sections calls for a feminist public addressing their different experiences of social injustice. The new media offers a public space for different feminists sector to build their communities, exhibit their identities and engage with the wider public.

5.Context: Mainland China and Hong Kong

After the Beijing Women Conference, China has also experienced a women's NGO boom. However, the context of women's movement in China is very different from its Western or even Latin America counterparts.

As a result of the dramatic social and political transformation in the past few decades, different types of civic organisations have come to coexist in China (Qiusha, 2002). During the socialist reform, three types of non-government entities, namely academic or professional associations, friendship organisations and people or mass organisations, were transformed into governmental organisation, each with a different political role in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In the late seventies, the government adjusted its social organisation policy granting some organisations considerable autonomy in management and programme operation. The control of mass organisation remains very strict, but at the same time, at the local level, 'quasi-governmental quasi-people' organisations have emerged in large numbers. Apart from the funding related factors, the party-state system, the state employment system and the overlap of government and social organisation personnel have delimited the autonomy of the civic sector.

Since 2003, the civil right movement (*weiquan yundong*) has come along with the rise of individualised online media. A large number of opinion leaders have emerged in forums, blogging platforms, social media sites and their political discourses have cultivated a strong awareness of 'citizen rights', 'social justice', 'liberty', etc., among the populace. The new state patronage finds it difficult to control the online public sphere where individual activists practice alternative citizenship (Yu, 2006) in a highly unorganised and individualised manner across the Internet (Yang, 2009; Yang, 2003).

As for the development of women's organisations, Wang and Zhang (2010) point out that since the early 1990s Chinese feminists have embraced the global feminist concept of gender. The 1995 UN conference provided an opportunity to legitimise women's NGOs and also provided conceptual frameworks for Chinese feminists to break away from the Chinese state's socialist framework of sexual equality. In addition, the conference opened up funding opportunities from

international donors, such as the Ford Foundation, for the setting up of relatively autonomous women's organisations.

However, the women's NGOs have not detached themselves from the official system. The viability and effectiveness of the women's NGO sector relies very much on its connection with the senior members and cadres of the All China Women's Federation. On the one hand, some critics and scholars raise questions about the new state patronage, arguing that the institutional dependency of women's organisations on the party-state may compromise their gender and human rights advocacy work. On the other hand, some argue that the strategies of 'embeddedness' help NGOs gain support and exert influence on state policies (Zhang, 2009; Lu, 2007; Cooper, 2006). The two arguments are two sides of the same coin- the co-existence of the state's readiness in cracking down on any challenge to its authority from the civil society with its selective tolerance of a burgeoning but compliant NGO sector.

In the past few years, some feminist activists have decided to leave the institutional channels and are now engaged in the online citizen rights movement. Yet, women's NGOs are not very active in engaging with the online public sphere. Most of the women's NGOs put their effort on bridging the gender digital divide through education and rural community work. Some, however, have been encouraged by the CCP to address the negative effect of the Internet, such as youth's Internet addiction and the spread of vulgar and indecent content. Nevertheless, there are occasions when women's organisations join the online citizen call for action (such as the call to support Deng Yujiao, a heroine who killed a government officer in self-defense).

In the context of Hong Kong, a post-colonial city, local residents still do not enjoy full voting rights for their legislature and city mayor (Chief Executive) elections. While the political system fails to 'represent the citizen', the people of Hong Kong have to execute their citizen rights through direct political participation. In recent years, the Internet has become a major platform for local residents to perform, defend and define their citizenship. For example, the practice of citizen journalism and flash mob mobilisation have opened up spaces for direct participation and deliberative democracy in recent years.

The democratisation process in the past few decades has led to a drastic change in citizenship. Under the colonial government, the majority of local residents were governed subjects ruled by a group of colonial elites and civil servants. With the development of representative politics in the 1980s and the rise of political party in the 1990s, Hong Kong people participated indirectly through exercising their voting rights in the district council and the legislature. After the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, constitutional reform had been frozen and has remained incomplete. Political frustration together with economic downturn brought half a million people to the street in 2003 and 2004 respectively and paved the way for more direct political participation.

In Western societies, the call for direct and alternative democracy is positively correlated with dissatisfaction with representative democracy (Dalton, 2001). In Hong Kong, however, the majority of opposition political elites, marginalised by the existing political system are, still fighting for universal suffrage. Hence, the alternative ways of civic engagement come along with increasingly intense political struggles for constitutional reform. For example, since 2004, a number of Internet radios and citizen media platforms have been established and these have gradually evolved into a vibrant online public sphere. Even though the relation between online media and democratisation remains unclear, a number of social events indicated that online media engagement has brought changes to public awareness and policy, thereby Hong Kong has been undergoing a new wave of democratic struggles.

Against such a background, the women's movement since the 1990s has also been limited by the delayed implementation of representative democracy. As formal democracy is yet to be fully developed in Hong Kong, women's movement groups negotiate their position in the political system by devising the global strategy of 'mainstreaming' women's agendas whereby more leaders and professionals from the women's NGOs are politically absorbed by the administration and recruited into consultative bodies. Since the Hong Kong government has ratified all the UN conventions in favour of equal opportunities against all forms of discrimination, it established the Equal Opportunities Commission (1996) and Women's Commission (2001) and engaged with most of the women's organisations in legislation for the protection of women and children against all forms of discrimination and violence. However, such kind of political absorption, to

some extent, has directed women's NGOs away from the recent wave of civic engagement and grassroots mobilisation. Indeed, compared to the new online citizen media in recent years, most of the web projects conducted by woman NGOs are serving as resource centres rather than engaging the public with gender issues and perspectives.

Along with the feminists, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) groups, such as GayStation and GdotTV, are most active in alternative media practice. In addition to community building through forums and e-mail lists, they 'come out' in the public arena through online video and dialogue with the mainstream heterosexual voice on issues related to LGBT's rights, censorship and other moral debates. More and more young women activists participate in online mobilisation to defend citizens rights. In spite of the awareness that women are marginalised in Internet activism, most of these young women are critical of the older generation feminists' attack on the 'masculine oppositional culture' in favour of a 'more civilised and feminine expression'. This resonate with Habermas' idea of communication rationality.

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