

Co-constructing a ‘Good Place’ (‘Eutopia’) in the Virtual Space: The Social Imaginary of a Hong Kong Youth-Initiated TV Drama Web-based Fangroup Forum

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Abstract

In this paper we describe and analyze a TV drama web-based fangroup forum which has been initiated by a Hong Kong secondary school student. The website organizational structure and activities are analyzed and discussed in terms of what seems to be transpiring in this entirely voluntarily co-constructed social space. We shall then analyse these on-line activities in terms of the kind of social imaginary (Taylor 2002) that seems to be emerging in this virtual space. Concluding the paper we shall discuss implications for our understanding of some ‘eu-topian’ possibilities of TV drama consumption practices and youth digital cultures despite the negative dominant public and academic discourses on youth cultures in Hong Kong.

Negative constructions of youth digital cultures in public and academic discourses in Hong Kong

Youth digital cultures remain a contested topic in both the public and academic discourses in Hong Kong. Youth as an 'other' category in the 'self-other' constructions produced in the dominant adult discourses is often associated with negative images: passive, blindly following trends, poor in literacy and communication skills and incapable of rational thinking and argumentation (see newspaper articles in the references section). Erni and Fung (2003) collated youth-related headlines occurring in the *South China Morning Post* and pointed out how Hong Kong media trundles out regular negative news about youth, portraying them as naive, ignorant, socially irresponsible and self-destructive. Academics also regularly churn out negative reports about Hong Kong youth's 'idol worship behaviour' (e.g. Yue 1999; 2002).

In this paper we focus on a TV drama web-based fangroup forum which has been initiated, built and co-maintained by a Hong Kong secondary school student together with a small group of volunteers serving as bulletin masters. They have laid down the rules of the game, and built an intricate on-line social infrastructure consisting of different levels of office-bearers (and mechanisms for achieving/losing them) among members. In the following sections we shall first describe the website structure and activities and then analyze what seems to be transpiring in this entirely voluntarily co-constructed virtual and social space. We shall then discuss these on-line activities in terms of the kind of social imaginary (Taylor 2002) that seems to be emerging in this virtual space, creating a community based on some shared ideas of what an imaginary ideal community might be (Bird 2003). Concluding the paper we shall discuss implications for our understanding of some 'eutopian' possibilities of youth digital cultures despite the negative dominant public and academic discourses on youth digital cultures in Hong Kong.

The 'Gathering of Fans of Jang-geum' ('只聚今迷') web-based fangroup forum

The recent trans-border popularity of the Korean historical TV drama, 'Dae Jang-geum'¹ is a story based on the Chosun Dynasty in Korea's history. It tells the tale of Seo Jang-geum, the first Chosun woman to become the emperor's court physician in mid sixteenth century. It was aired between January-May 2005, by the leading Hong Kong broadcast TV station, HK TVB, and has broken all local and foreign TV drama ratings records in Hong Kong. The average ratings reached percent and at peak times to 50 percent (the final episode). It has attracted diversified audiences that cross gender, age, education and social class boundaries (Lin and Kim 2005).

We observed the activities of the website regularly from February-May 2005. The web forum structures, regulations, discussion topics and interactions among members are analyzed. Calculated on May 1, 2005, the site has over 3,800 members and over 53,000 messages. Around one-fifth of the messages were

selected for in-depth textual analysis. These messages are either messages posted by students, or messages with relatively high viewing rates (over 300 viewing rates). Though the age of individual members is not specified in their profiles, it is believed that most of them (approximately 80 percent) are young studentsⁱⁱ.

In terms of gender, this forum attracts both female and male members, with a larger proportion of females. On the other hand, the members also come from different countries including Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, U.S.A., Korean and Canada. Nevertheless, most of the members originate from Hong Kong, and both Cantonese-style Chinese and Mandarin Chinese seem to be the most frequently used language styles in the forum. In the following sections we shall describe and analyze the role structure and activities of this fangroup website.

Management team

The forum was set up by a Form Seven (Grade thirteen) Hong Kong male student in February 2005, when TVB started showing the TV drama, 'Dae Jang-geum' ('Dae' for short). With the web name 'Emperor Siu-ho', this male student acts as the chief forum master, who claims that he is a loyal fan of 'Dae'. He formed a 'management team' with other twenty-five volunteers, who are responsible for different bulletin boards on the website. There is a 'Recruitment Centre' where webmasters are recruited. Their duties include selecting 'good' messages to highlight in a special section (called 'jing-hua' or selected essays) and deleting 'bad'/old ones (we shall discuss later the criteria they explicitly draw upon to do this), responding to members' questions and problems, and organizing on-line and off-line activities, etc.

Social rank system

Once the members have registered as a member, they enter the 'court' with different social ranks. This social rank system is similar to the one in 'Dae', with the 'Emperor (the chief forum master) and the royal harem. The status of the members ranges from junior levels like 'palace maid', to middle levels like 'female palace official', to senior levels like 'princess-consort' and even 'Queen'. Members with high social positions can have more benefits, such as having more space for personal signature (signature files are attached automatically to the bottom of the senders' messages), having privilege to open new discussion topics in selected sites, etc.

Under this 'court' structure, a points-accumulation system is set up for measuring the contribution of individual members. All members can promote to senior ranks by submitting qualified messages. This system involves both rewards and penalties. Those members breaking the forum rules (e.g. plagiarism, flaming, etc.) will be punished and points will be deducted. This hierarchical social structure and rewards/penalties system encourage participation, high quality discussion (we shall discuss the criteria

they use later) and subscription to the forum regulations.

Basic structure of the forum

The forum is divided into seven main sections: 'Public Announcement', 'Integrated Site', 'Jang-geum Forum', 'Actors/Actress', 'Site of Fellow Members', 'Response to Problems', 'On-line alliances'. The 'Public Announcement' section posts announcements from the management team. The 'Integrated Site' includes diverse topics not necessarily related to 'Dae' (e.g. school life). The 'Jang-geum Forum' is a place for all kinds of discussion related to the drama; 'Actor/actress' include the news on characters; 'Site of Fellow Members' discusses the print novel of 'Dae'; 'Response to Problems' answers technical problems encountered by the members; 'On-line Alliance' shows the web-links of recommended websites.

Each of the above divisions consists of sub-sections. For instance, within the site of 'Jang-geum Forum', there are sub-sites such as 'Star Worship', 'Discussion on Storylines', 'Creation Corner of Jang-geum', etc. The 'Public Announcement' is further subdivided into six 'departments'. They resemble the court departments of the ancient Chosun society, which is the historical background of 'Dae'. The 'duties' of each department are summarized in Table 1 in Appendix.

Cross-over of youth media and digital cultures: From personal viewing to group sharing and from TV media consumption to digital textual production

As a group of fans deeply attached to the Korean TV drama 'Dae Jang-geum', the members perform a wide range of media consumption practices related to the drama, including textual productive activities. There is a section called 'Creation Corner of Jang-geum', where members can post their own creations such as arts, literatures and other mediums. One of the senior members, 'Roro', re-wrote the story of 'Dae' by incorporating some new characters (with the names of other online members) into the story (the first chapter was posted on May 14, 2005; with a viewing rate of 120), and other members gave him comments.

Another dimension of the productive literacies shown by the youth is their competence in computer knowledge. In addition to the basic maintenance of website by the webmasters, many ordinary members are keen on creating texts with illustrations, drawing pictures with computer tools, as well as exchanging files with other members by on-line software. Most young members seem to belong to the group of 'high digital producers', who emphasize high quality textual production.

In addition to textual reproduction, they also participate in what Fiske (1989) called 'enunciative productivity'--ways of showing one's membership of the fangroup. When the Korean stars in 'Dae' came

to Hong Kong, some fans organized off-line 'star-chasing activities'. The web group extends star worship activity from a personal, private setting to a collective, public environment. Many of them also share the experiences of viewing other TV dramas, mostly Korean dramas, and appreciate the 'serious production' as compared to local dramas.

Another typical phenomenon of youth cultures is the frequent use of the Internet. According to the applications forms submitted by the users, most of them get on-line everyday, and the average on-line time is around two to three hours for weekdays. During weekends, many of them stay on-line for more than five hours (e.g. one of the members claimed that he stays on-line for twenty-four hours on Sundays). It also suggests that their pop media consumption activities seem to be incorporated into digital cultures. The intense, passionate energies brought out by TV dramas also seem to propel these young people into diverse, digital, social and textual production activities.

Adoring Dae Jang-geum: From fantasy to reflection

The process of identification, or personalization implies a sense of fantasy. This fantasy expresses the desires for fullness, which bridges the gap between reality and wish (Hinderman, 1992). In this case the characters in 'Dae' embody some idealistic social qualities, identities and relations desired by the fans, all of which they also explicitly acknowledge that they could find in the 'modern' world and reality. A male student 'Chung' described the female protagonist, Jang-geum, as an 'ideal wife'. He wrote, 'she is gentle, caring, good at cooking, good at healing, having a pretty face, brave and tolerant...where can we find such a good wife?' (February 20, 2005; viewing rates: 1124).

If Jang-geum is an ideal wife in the eyes of the male youth, the male protagonist, Jung-ho would be an ideal husband of female youth. Many members described him as 'gentle', 'handsome', 'faithful', 'caring', 'good and able'. One of them called 'Siu Pak' regarded him as 'national treasure' that is almost 'extinct'. This comment indicates that she is aware of the gap between the presence of the ideal man in the drama and the absence of such a good person in reality. Another female student, 'Uncle Duk-gu', explained her reason for choosing Jung-ho as her 'ideal husband':

'When I have troubles, he will stay with me; when I feel unhappy, he will comfort me; when I am in danger, he will protect me; when I have difficulties, he will sacrifice for me; when I have my own career, he will wait for me patiently...so touching, it's difficult to find (a man like him) in reality.' (April 6, 2005; viewing rates: 1124)

The beautiful romance between Jang-geum and Jung-ho constitutes a major attraction to the youth. Some

members described the relationship as 'restrained' but 'sweet', just like the member 'MayMay' who stated that 'hugging is better than kissing'(April 6, 2005; viewing rates: 483). Many of them compared this 'ideal pure love' with the 'modern love' in the real world that they encountered and they engaged in explicit discussion of different ways of expressing love and affirm the subtle ways embodied and affirmed in the drama. Below are some quotes from the messages of the fans:

'I agree that it is not a must to express heterosexual love in a sexually explicit way...modern love story is always transient and gone quickly, like a game rather than sincere love. That's why I love this drama so much.' (Posted by 'mikyungfans' on April 6, 2005; viewing rates: 483)

'Maybe modern people are too obsessed with 'flashing love', and they believe that overt expression is right and proper. This type of restrained love is so rare, so it is even more valuable, something we long for.'(Posted by 'keanu' on May 15, 2005; viewing rates: 483)

'I think that nowadays we could not find such kind of 'true love'...a kind of love that overcomes all difficulties, knowing each other deeply and forgiving each other...modern love is like a child's play...one-night stand is so popular...get married whenever you like...and divorce when you don't like.' (Posted by 'biglonggoldfan' on April 4, 2005; viewing rates: 204)

These young people also seem to be attracted to other elements of the story beyond the romance. Many members emphasize the 'multiple dimensions' of the drama, which is said to possess mixed features. One of the female members, 'Chau Ying', appreciated the ways of describing different kinds of 'qing' (a Chinese word for 'compassion') in the story. She wrote, 'The thing I appreciate most is the director's skills in writing feelings/affection, especially the affection between women, from mother-daughter, friends, classmates, teacher-student, senior-junior, and even enemies.' (April 5, 2005; viewing rates:379).

Many members take a further step beyond 'purely adoring' the story, and analyze the meanings as well as the social/historical context of the story. A member called 'Liar' posted a topic 'I find that the Chosun royal palace has more genuine human warmth than the one in China' (April 3, 2005; viewing rates: 566). This controversial message attracted thirty-eight members to post a response, with both responses agreeing and disagreeing to it, drawing on different arguments. One of the members, 'btnion' seems to suggest what we would call a 'utopian' attitude, and he/she considered the world as originally a 'common wealth'. He/she wrote:

'Actually it is impossible to make a comparison. (We) should know that there are bad people and good people in every place. The world is originally a common wealth. Boundaries are drawn by those

greedy people to separate lands, races, and differentiate people with different colors. Competition and comparison occur, and then there are high and low differentiations. Actually if we share (resources) together, why should we compare?' (April 4, 2005; viewing rates: 566)

This group of youth also expresses their concern on gender inequalities. The unfair social system and court practices faced by the female characters made them think deeply about gender relations/power relations. As one of the members wrote, 'I find those Chosun physician ladies (medicine women) very miserable. They worked so hard in learning medical skills, and they were even literate. They were smarter than common people, but their positions were the lowest...It's not fair.' (Posted by 'masterlamlam' on March 5, 2005; viewing rates: 811). Their comments show that young fans are not only focused on the romance, but are also eager to share critical, reflective views on other social issues.

Sharing experience of 'examination life'

While the members were initially bonded together by a common interest in the TV drama 'Dae', their discussion topics range from examinations, school life, leisure activities, and current affairs to personal experiences. These messages are mainly found two main sub-forums—'The HKALE Struggle and Success of the Emperor', and 'The Chat Room Not Related to Jang-geum'. In the former section, students exchange tips on how to prepare for public examinations, share their past experiences, and also give emotional support to one another.

Most of them believe that 'practice makes perfect', and suggest others to have better preparation before the examinations. Useful preparation work shared by the members includes listening attentively in class, reviewing notes after school, doing past exam papers, reading more books etc. Some members give more practical guidelines, specifying important points for different subjects.

Besides these 'practical suggestions', the members also provide emotional support for one another. Many of them like to share their performance every day during the exam period. Some students used the 'Jang-geum spirit' to encourage those sitting for examinations. A member called 'Phoebe who loves Dae Jang-geum most' wrote, 'I believe that the best way (to study for exams) is to learn from Jang-geum, NEVER GIVE UP! It is because if you give up, you will lose everything.' (The words 'NEVER GIVE UP' were in English in the original posting; posted on April 9, 2005; viewing rates: 87).

They also talk about their future plans, such as desirable occupations, and target subjects in universities. Some of them analyzed the pros and cons in choosing certain subjects/universities, which showed the preparation they have made for the future. Some members discussed which university is the best for

majors in Chinese Medicine. Many members seemed to be under great stress during the examinations, and need to share their feelings and pressures with other members. Some of them expressed their worries about the present educational system (e.g. examination syllabus), and the fear of lacking competitiveness in finding a good job. Below is an exchange between two young fans, which illustrates the on-line emotional support that can be provided by other members when a member feels frustrated:

‘Sigh... in the past I worked very hard each day, never tried to get by without attending to work...every night I practiced mathematics till one or two o’clock (in the morning). I used to have such kind of perseverance...However, now I have lost all these targets, seem like losing the direction.’ (Posted by ‘cfw’ on April 26, 2005; viewing rates: 83)

‘Oh...How come you feel like that suddenly? (Are you) having private affairs? Don’t be like that. You were so hard-working before! (You should) keep it up...you can tell me your private matters; see if I can help you or not.’ (Posted by ‘carmenmok’ on April 26, 2005; viewing rates: 83)

Hong Kong young people are under great exam pressure and might feel at a loss about their future at times. In this TV drama fangroup website these young people seem to have developed a bonding based on similar experiences in school and exam life in Hong Kong and have provided one another with the much-needed peer support in this very competitive education system and society. They also seem to readily draw upon what they call the ‘Jang-geum spirit’ (the persevering attitude of the TV drama protagonist) to encourage one another.

Construction of social identities and social relations in a new community

Cyberspace is a relatively ‘free’ space for different kinds of exploration, which brings about experiences beyond real life (Abbot 1998; Baym 2000). Bennett (2004) proposes that the practice of fandom has become a central feature of contemporary youth cultures, both in their construction of collective identities and in rendering such identities ‘authentic’. In this study, the young people seem to be extending their real community into a virtual community, drawing on some existing social relations while escaping from those restraining them in the off-line world.

As explained in the previous section, the members can get promoted to higher ranks by posting quality messages. Many of them are deeply attached to these ‘virtual identities’ and get great satisfaction when promoted to the desired roles. For instance, when one of the members, ‘Siu Ae’, finally became ‘Queen Suk-won’, other members including the ‘Emperor’ were all engaged in a warm and lively talk, congratulating her. Here are some of the quotes from their discussion (all with 450 viewing rates):

‘Hehe... The queen should learn from Yeon-seng, serving the Emperor with meals.’ (Posted by ‘Dae Jang-geum’ on April 5, 2005)

‘Oh everyone is sending congratulations to me...any wedding present for me? As you have become Suk-won, hurry to register at the ‘Marriage Introduction Centre of Jang-geum!’ (Posted by ‘Emperor Siu-ho’ on April 6, 2005)

‘Cheers! Your Majesty. Queen Suk-won, please accept (the Emperor) as soon as possible. We the ministers are waiting...(waiting for the) prince and princess.’(Posted by ‘roro’ on May 6, 2005)

In taking up high social rank roles and identities in this royal palace role-playing game young students can enact empowered identities which are beyond their reach in reality. Adults can no longer impose their disparaging discourses on the youth here, and the students practice self-control and self-governance in this virtual community. This explains why the seemingly highly hierarchicalized social order (what Taylor (2002) calls the ‘traditional mode of hierarchical complementarity’) as constructed in this role-playing game does not seem to be experienced by these young people as ‘autocratic’ at all but rather as empowering and fun. The hierarchy is strict but there is an open, fair and easily assessable channel (i.e. rules of the game) for mobility in this social order.

While these young people draw on the social relations of the historical Chosun royal court office structure in building their virtual social order, they also readily draw on the social relations of contemporary social institutions such as the school and the family. This is like a ‘condensed form’ of a society, with both freedom and order for its ‘citizens’. Take the organization of off-line star chasing activities as an example, the management team once posted a list of rules for the participants, such as following the organizer (who must be over twenty years old), making registration before the functions, leaving contact information of family members to the organizer, etc. (Posted by ‘Emperor Siu-ho’ on April 1, 2005; viewing rates: 229).

This is similar to the case of an extra-curricular field trip organized by the school; for example, ‘school picnic’ which involves safety rules for students to follow. In the case of a fan group, the organizing team resembles the role of the school/teacher in organizing off-line fangroup activities. Apart from drawing on school social relations and practices, the sense of ‘having a family’ is also mentioned by many members. This point would be discussed in the following section.

Sense of belonging to a big family

Youth cultures seem to be about shared ideas. Young people have the desire to participate in, or create,

some kind of 'community', sharing discussion and communing with like-minded peers (Abbot 1998; Bennett 2004). The on-line community in this study seems to be seen as re-kindling a sense of 'family', that is 'a family of invisible friends', characterized by commonality of interests and a sense of 'shared consciousness' (Robins 2000: 88). They build up talk communities (with diversified topics) in the cyberspace and establish a virtual kind of family relations.

As a virtual 'royal palace', this is like a 'second home' where they get sheltered and supported, a place far away from the complicated reality. Once the forum was closed for personal reasons, the members were very worried. One member even said that she/he didn't want to get onto the computer without the forum. After it was re-opened, they have the feeling of 'coming back home'. Below are some messages they posted when the forum was re-opened (all posted on April 25, 2005; with 153 viewing rates):

'(I) have a feeling of going back home! (I have) such a strong sense of belonging...when I see those old members getting together again after such a long time, my feeling is difficult to express.'
(Posted by 'carmenmok')

'Hehe... No need to wander around after coming back. This is the best place...very happy...Emperor Siu-ho is so great! Thank you very much.'
(Posted by 'Ls')

'Yes! There's no need to move around without a definite residence. Thank you so much Your Majesty, who cares about us the ministers even during your examination. Thank you for your divine favor.'
(Posted by 'triangel_88')

Many of them described the site as a 'family', where the 'family members' can chat together and support one another. The role-playing game structure does have a very non-progressive, male-dominated structure: the male emperor in the highest position with all other members in female subordinate office-bearer roles. However, it seems that the male 'emperor' actually functions more as a modern webmaster who maintains the technical infrastructure of the web forum to enable members to interact. From the above messages, it seems that some members greatly appreciate the emperor's efforts in re-opening the web forum after a period of closing down due to technical problems.

When sometimes conflicts and arguments arise, many 'peace-makers' will come out and mediate between the disputing parties, emphasizing the 'united nature' of a family. The following examples show their sense of belonging to this 'family' that they co-construct (Both were posted on April 4, 2005; with 947 viewing rates):

‘We should preserve a mood of harmony...It’s so happy for people with similar interests to share together...so we should not spoil the friendship. We are ‘a family’.’ (Posted by ‘Supporter of Geum-geum and little Min’).

‘We are like a family; don’t stir up anger by such trifles. This forum should be peaceful and happy.’ (Posted by ‘iris1872’)

In this big family, student members seem to engage in interpersonal interactions and social relations that are similar and yet different from those in their off-line world, forming their ideal (or ‘eutopian’) on-line community. Nevertheless, the social relations that obtain in the off-line world do not necessarily ‘disappear’ in the virtual world, but they are transformed, selected or extended. In our study, the young members build up virtual identities that are independent of their own roles in their off-line life, but at the same time, they also draw on the Chosun court system, the school rules as well as the family social relations in co-constructing this virtual community of theirs.

Maintaining high quality discussion

One point that this web group management team consistently stresses is the ‘quality’ of discussion. Members have to post ‘high quality messages’ in order to gain ‘points’, and members who break the regulations (e.g. quarrelling with others, copying messages) will be subject to marks deduction or even restricted access to the site. The chief forum master always emphasizes that members should post ‘good messages’. He used the following examples to illustrate the difference between a ‘good message’ and a ‘bad message’ (Posted by ‘Emperor Siu-ho’ on February 24, 2005; viewing rates: 299):

‘All palace aids should read this: a good message should have an ‘opinion’ plus a supporting ‘reason’, and also personal analysis.

Example one:

‘I find Court Lady Choi very bad!’

(Members always post this kind of message, but this is not a good message. Others do not know why you find Court Lady Choi bad. Just a short sentence cannot stimulate meaningful discussion.)

Example two:

‘I find Court Lady Choi very bad! It is because she treated Jang-geum like that, she was not fair

to Court Lady Han, either. She was indiscriminate in her means to achieve success, and even accused Court Lady Han falsely. A valuable life was lost because of that...'

Example three:

'To the contrary, I find Court Lady Choi's badness understandable. It is because she took up the burden of the Choi's family; she just wanted to maintain the family's success. She did experience struggles in her heart; she didn't want to be born in the Choi's family...'

(Example two could lead to the discussion in example three, and example three can lead to even more discussion... this makes the forum more lively, and the content more solid.)

I hope that all palace maids can take this as a standard.'

The criteria the chief webmaster uses to establish what count as 'high quality' messages seem to draw on what is taught in school about argumentative essays and resembles the communicative rationality espoused in Habermas's public sphere (1989), that people come together to examine different arguments in a rational way rather than just expressing one's opinions without arguments (more on this in the next section). In addition, they try to differentiate themselves from the so-called 'rubbish forums', like the forum of TVB (which is described as 'messy' and 'lacking order and control'). On the other hand, the chief forum master suggested the members to learn from the Taiwan forum users (e.g. members of GTV website), who could write meaningful and in-depth comments/analysis.

High literacy levels and rich intertextuality are also shown in some of the members' messages. In the textual dimension, many of them like to quote from other media sources, such as famous literatures, popular texts and news articles. For instance, in the discussion of the love relations, some members quoted the poem of Indian poet, Debendranath Tagore, to express the loneliness of love. A female student with the web name 'Candy_Candy' posted a television commentary from the newspaper entitled 'Korean TV dramas seem to be about the same old things, yet they have new elements', and added her own comment, 'I find it quite true. Recently Hong Kong dramas are roughly produced; they either rewrite the stories of others, or just copy the ideas directly.' (May 3, 2005; viewing rates: 94).

Other members might reflect on the history and culture of Korean society, as well as criticize the local media industry's performance. Based on other textual sources, these members integrate their own ideas into other texts, and bring together different texts in illustrating their viewpoints. The intertextuality they performed should be highly appreciated, as this reveals their high levels of media and cultural literacies. Besides, many of them remain critical in analyzing the media texts and will not blindly support the opinions of others.

Flaming and rational debate, freedom and order in the self-organized on-line public space

Fangroups are found to be very organized in many literatures (Lewis 1992; Jenkins 1992), and some fans are even described as 'citizens' (King 1997; Smith and Ingham 2003). They experience a sense of democracy in the self-organized fan community. For instance, the internet is believed to shift the balance of power between media producers and consumers, as the fans could create impressive sites themselves (Baym 2000). In this sense on-line communities are supposed to offer the best medium to promote equality and freedom of expression among all media.

However, democracy is not the same as 'lack of control and regulations'. As suggested by Hamelink (2000), culture and technology should be subject to democratic control, and Internet users should define and apply their own rules. It ensures that human rights could be realized in a democratic system. Under this principle, disciplinary actions are occasionally taken in cyberspace (Bird 2003). This is similar to the system of law and the social contract in our off-line society, and here members are committed to the social contract in the virtual community.

As indicated in the previous sections, 'Gathering of Fans of Jang-geum' has provided many rules to the members, which seem to be oriented towards the kind of communicative rationality espoused by Habermas (1987). These rules seem to aim at ensuring that members will not just write 'superficial comments', or act as a 'copying machine' (which is a common practice in the Hong Kong schooling culture), but to look deeper into the matters/issues and formulate their own arguments. The management teams of the website seem to be oriented towards co-constructing the fangroup forum as 'a space of reason and civility', which we see as linked to Western modernity and Enlightenment thinking (Hertherington, 1997:13).

The website management team seems to be encouraging members to move away from the practice of merely expressive culture (e.g. inserting too many emoticons, just saying 'wonderful' or 'beautiful' without elaborating one's views). On the other hand, irrational debate is not allowed and highly criticized in this forum. For instance, when two of the members argued about the 'real name' of a Korean actor with insulting words, other members told them to pay attention to the rules of 'rationality', as shown in the following messages:

'(Do you think) scolding others is a rational behavior? No one wants (his/her) IP banned for 30 days. Please stop fighting!' (Posted by 'Yeon-sang' on May 26, 2005; viewing rates: 237)

'Stop insulting each other. Don't damage the peacefulness over a small matter. Please deal with the problem patiently and keep calm.' (Posted by 'Medicine Woman Jang-geum' on May 26, 2005; viewing

rates: 237)

One of the members (also the webmaster of the sub-forum 'Creative Corner of Jang-geum'), 'roro', made a remark on the importance of 'EQ' in making good arguments. He wrote:

'I find you (member involved in the argument) to be a very confident person. Besides having IQ, I hope you can also possess EQ. It requires both high IQ and EQ to deal with a conflict...It would be helpful to your future too.' (April 30, 2005; viewing rates: 343).

Their emphasis on 'rationality', 'peacefulness' and 'EQ' point to the ideal of rational communication and of co-constructing a public sphere of reason and civility. Habermas (1987) promotes an ideal of public, rational, and this public sphere should respect people with different opinions (which need to subscribe to criteria of communicative rationality). The 'Gathering of fans of Jang-geum' seems to be oriented towards meeting this requirement, as it respects members with diversified interests. For instance, when some members talked about the negative responses to 'Dae Jang-geum', many of them held a rather 'open' attitude to the attacks. One of them called 'FATTY' wrote, '(this is) a society with freedom, it's normal to have different voices' (May 3, 2005; viewing rates: 454).

In this sense, diversity could be achieved with an open attitude that allows expression of different opinions, and the public use of reason facilitates the possibility of individual critical judgment. However, the online public space cannot be described as a 'real public sphere', but rather like a 'peculiar public sphere' suggested by Chun and Cheng (2004). Despite the diversity of topics and emphasis on rational communication, there is limited (or even no) political impact and social movement/political resistance is very difficult to achieve in this online 'family'. Nevertheless, it is a good start for youth to train themselves in this kind of rational and civil communication, to develop the skills and attitudes that are required to participate in the public sphere 'outside'.

Accountability as important criteria of ideal communication

Citizenship emphasizes human rights and civil liberties. The definition of the 'democratic ideal' emphasizes that people should be able to participate on the basis of equality. There is a utopian hope that the mediated interaction in the cyberspace could represent an 'ideal and universal form of human association and collectivity' (Robins 2000:80), akin to the social imaginary of the public sphere and a democratically self-governing people of Western modernity (Taylor 2002). In our study, the fans website of 'Dae' started and managed by a group of Hong Kong young people is accessible to all on-line users, and people could share their views on and beyond the TV drama.

Habermas (1987) proposes that there can be an ideal form of public debate, which potentially allows equality of access and equal rights to all citizens, provided that it could find an institutional context (Habermas, 1987). The 'Gathering of Fans of Jang-geum' web forum illustrates the importance of an institutionalized structure in managing an on-line discussion group and orienting it towards a space of reason and civility. With a team of webmasters, the website seems to provide a space for public participation and ideal communicative situation, together with a 'hierarchical' but open and fair system with social mobility mechanisms built into it.

The webmasters would not punish junior members without reasons, but clearly state the 'faults' of the members. A list of 'warned members' is posted in the 'Police Department' and it is updated almost everyday. Those members who have broken the rules would receive 'formal' and 'personal' warnings in this sub-site. The web-master would list out the reasons for penalty and the form of penalty (e.g. banning IP for three days, point deduction). In some cases, the webmasters would give 'informal warnings' to the 'law-breakers' before executing the 'power' they possess.

It can be seen the management team enforces rules, procedures and institutional mechanisms according to a set of criteria (e.g. criteria of personal creativity in the Creative Corner), which in turn helps to ensure public accountability and democratic discussion. There is a section called 'Public Court' where members could submit complaints to the webmasters here, and the webmasters would undergo investigation and report the results to all members. Members who are dissatisfied with the judgment results could 'appeal' to the senior members. It resembles the appeal system in modern day society and promotes the principles of openness and fairness.

The forum also seems to at least partially fulfill the criteria of accountability by listening to the opinions of the members and responding to them. For instance, some junior members commented on the reward system and suggested that more incentives should be added. After a few days, the webmaster agreed to increase the space for signature of the junior members. Besides, the chief forum master also decided to set up some new sub-sites (such as the 'Medical Centre') as requested by some members. It reveals that the management team seems to be oriented towards the ideals of encouraging participation in decision-making.

An important evidence of public accountability is that the 'performance' of the webmasters is made open to the members. Their frequency of visits to the site is shown to the public, under the section 'Management team'. The records show that most of them keep an eye on the website frequently and these webmasters would be praised. Webmasters who have been absent for a long time will be harshly

criticized. For instance, one of their status is described as follows, 'disappeared for 98 days ! An irresponsible webmaster! Has he/she fallen into the toilet bowl?'. The 'Emperor' (the chief webmaster) himself is also subject to this kind of continuous work performance appraisal just like all other members on the management team. There are no special privileges accorded to him.

Fandom and citizenship: Expressive Culture, rational culture and affective energies

Traditionally topics such as popular media consumption and TV drama fandom seem to be remote from topics such as citizenship and the public sphere. However, as van Zoonen (2005) points out, there are at least three analogies between fandom and citizenship:

First, both fan communities and political constituencies come into being as a result of performance; second, fan groups and political constituencies resemble each other when it comes to the endeavors that make one part of the community; and—finally—both rest on emotional investments that are intrinsically linked to rationality and lead to 'affective intelligence.' (van Zoonen, 2005: 53)

Van Zoonen continues to point out that 'fan groups are social formations that are structurally equivalent to political constituencies' (2005: 58). We witness in the analysis in the above sections that the 'Gathering of Fans of Jang-geum'. TV drama fangroup community seems to be structurally similar to a political constituency. It has a well-organized social structure, a set of agreed-upon rules, regulations, and a reward and penalty system governing participation in what most of the members seem to be aspiring to co-construct: a space of reason and civility (a social contract agreed upon when one registers as a member). It has different functional posts which different members take up and a recruitment and promotion system based on personal merit and contribution to the community. Like many political constituencies, it has a hierarchical structure under which new members need to demonstrate their contribution before they can take up more important posts. It also has an appeal centre where proposals and complaints regarding the management and governance of the web forum are listened to, negotiated and settled. One can see that the social, communicative and literacy competencies and attitudes developed among these young people as they continue to engage themselves in interactive activities in this forum are actually not too different from the competencies and attitudes required of citizenship in a modern society.

While the criteria for counting a message as a 'quality message' are oriented towards norms of rational culture, the topics being discussed are diverse and very often evolve around expressive popular culture, collective fantasy, desire, romance, adoration of stars and social relationships. The huge amount of energies invested in these topics and the sharing and discussion of them among young popular culture fans leads us to ask the crucial question of what motivates young people to participate in discussion in the

public space. Very often young people are placed in a community by institution (e.g. school) or kinship (e.g. family) but not of their own choice. However, in the fangroup website community that we witness here, the members come together voluntarily, exercising their agency to enter into a public space to interact with originally strangers who then together make themselves part of a community, becoming fellow forum members, forging a new kind of virtual sociality, and in the process forming a self-organized public (Warner 2002).

Habermas's notion of rational participation in the public sphere has largely been rooted in male bourgeois experience in modern European societies to the effect of excluding the experience of women and youths and hence its bias towards emphasis on a limited range and kind of topics and contexts that is usually associated with discussion in the public sphere. Poovey (2002) points out that the philosophers' writings only constituted part of the picture. Historically women (and we would add youth as well) in different social positions have engaged in activities and practices that provided us with 'a more textured image of the modern social imaginary' (Poovey, 2002:142). Against the stereotypic image of Hong Kong youth constructed by some academic discourses as un-independent-minded and uninterested in political ideals (e.g. not worshipping historical political figures such as Dr. Sun Yat-sen) and mainly demonstrating popular cultural star worship (Yue 1999; 2002), we argue that there seems to be a deep-rooted societal bias against the affective energies associated with youth pop culture, often seeing it as irrational. We propose that the literature on the public sphere and citizenship which has often marginalized topics of fantasy and youth pop culture will need to be reexamined and reworked. It is to the topics of star worship and fantasy that we shall turn in the next section.

Star worship, fantasy, utopia and social imaginaries

It seems to be a worldwide trend that popular cultural stars (e.g. pop music stars, pop movie/TV stars, sports stars) have increasingly become major figures that youths worship (Emanuel 1990; Jeffrey 1991). This phenomenon constitutes what some academics call '3-star-worship' (Yue 1999). It is, however, all too easy to dismiss youths' star worship practices as merely 'symptoms' and expression of an immature mind. We need to unpack the dense cultural meanings of star worship and fantasy, and their seldom-discussed connection to utopia and modern social imaginaries.

Dyer (1986) proposes that the popular media stars we worship represent what our experience is or more often how we love it to be. They represent social categories and values that certain groups of people in a society at a certain historical conjuncture desire and affirm. While basically agreeing with Dyer we want to extend the analysis to include fantasy and to argue that the basic structure of feeling (Williams 1995) underlying star worship and fantasy is not qualitatively different from that underlying sociopolitical

utopian thinking as well as the social imaginaries emerging and circulating in a society.

Ang (1985) argues that many female characters in soap operas function not so much as role models, but rather as symbolic realizations of feminine subject positions into which viewers can put themselves, in fantasy, and that fantasy should not be seen as mere illusion, but as a reality in itself and a fundamental aspect of human existence. Bird (2003) suggests that 'fantasy' enables individuals to develop their unspoken desires alone or in strictly intimate situations, yet it can also be a collaborative project, as revealed by the intimate community built through fantasy, which is even extend it to 'real-life' communities.

The fantasy experienced by fans in their media consumption and star worship practices is deeply pleasurable and research studies seem to have so far focused mainly on the psychological mechanisms and logics underlying the pleasure of the fantasy experience itself and not on what these pleasurable practices and experiences could possibly lead to. For instance, Singaporean cultural theorist Chua Beng-huat argues that the 'feminist aura' that surrounds the body of research on soaps mainly amounts to 'giving women agency watching soaps' (personal communication, July 2004), implying that this line of research is mainly to legitimize female pleasure in soaps watching, which had hitherto been stigmatized in both public and academic discourses.

As a response to Chua's comment we would like to propose in the present study that sometimes TV drama-watching (especially when the TV drama embodies a relatively progressive social imaginary) can lead to progressive practices: for instance, participating in reasoned and civil discussion in the public sphere, apprenticing oneself into the identities of empowered agents, dignified and responsible office-bearers and netizens of a virtual community, and in the process, acquiring the competencies, literacies, attitudes and skills, in short, the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991) required of citizenship in a modern society.

Cyberspace can be considered as offering a utopian vision by suggesting that what is utopic in the off-line world might be relatively more realizable in the virtual space. The word 'Utopia' was coined by combining the word meaning 'no place' ('ou-topia') with the word meaning 'good place' ('eu-topia'). Utopia is associated with 'the supposedly perennial idea, dating from the time of Plato, of the creation of the good society' (Hetherington, 1997:11). The use of the word 'utopia' in our ordinary language implies that 'the good place' ('the good society') is 'nowhere' to be found and yet it continues to serve as a social and political ideal to inspire us. In fact Habermas (1987, 1989) acknowledges that the notion of communicative rationality serves as an ideal to measure communicative actions and that it should continue to serve as an ideal for people to strive for in modern society.

But what counts as a good society? Different societies at different historical times can have different social imaginaries (Taylor 2002). However, as Lee and LiPuma (2002: 194) point out, 'for the Euro-American world and increasingly for the world as a whole, the public sphere, the modern citizen-state, and the market are the basic components of the social imaginary of modernity.' Poovey (2002) further points out that the experimental method and the objectification of human beings and abstraction of human nature (e.g. as psychological constructs, mental operations, and social functions) are central to the modern social imaginary.

A social imaginary is not simply a social theory developed by specialists but 'is at least partly generated by ordinary people for use in life, and it reveals itself in stories, myths, and commonplaces as well as theoretical narratives' (Poovey 2002; 131). What we would like to propose in this paper is that TV dramas constitute an important imaginary space where alternative social imaginaries (i.e. imaginaries not entirely the same as the dominant social imaginary) are played out or embodied, and these alternative social imaginaries often have a eu-topian dimension to it (i.e. it portrays a 'good place' and realizes an ideal social order). However, by its nature as an imaginary re-creation of the social world, there is always a tension between the realism and idealism of a drama. What media critics call 'fantasy' we propose to call idealism or a 'eu-topian' imaginary, which is about the ways in which people imagine their ideal social existence: how ideally they should fit together with others, how ideally things should go on between them and their fellows, between humans and nature, and between humans and animals, how ideally father/mother and son/daughter, brother and sister, men and women (husband and wife) should treat each other, and so on and so forth.

Where can this good place (ideal social order) be found? We argue that people often seek to find it in the imaginary space of TV dramas, and some of the fans also want to re-create a similar, good place in the virtual space, hence our use of the words 'eu-topian social imaginary' in the title of this paper to describe what seems to be transpiring in the 'Gathering of Fans of Jang-geum' web forum. We use the word 'eu-topian' instead of 'utopian' to describe the fans' social imaginary because it seems, at least to some fans of this virtual community, that this imaginary is partly realizable in the on-line world, if not in their off-line world. This is shown in the following messages, which come under the topic of 'what are the characteristics of the 'Gathering of Fans of Jang-geum' website':

'Many disputes (just kidding!), have the same interests; have the same goals in life! All of us love Dae Jang-geum.' (Posted by 'carmenmok' on April 25, 2005; viewing rates: 109)

- ' 1. Many members, (they are) lovely, and have self-discipline.
2. Love Dae Jang-geum, love the website, love the earth.

3. Many young people, and also have young minds.
4. Gather fans from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, extract the essence from the TV station.
5. Webmasters are nice but strict.'

(Posted by 'Lady Fa Fa' on April 25, 2005; viewing rates: 109)

'A bit like coming back home...it is because everyone chats like family members here, shares the latest news. All of us are so warm, well-behaved and helpful.' (Posted by 'vivian' on April 26, 2005; viewing rates: 109)

In this co-constructed virtual community, the members feel that they are like family members: there is warmth, a feeling of coming home, sometimes with some conflicts, but most can be dissolved because of their common love for Jang-geum. Who is Jang-geum who can inspire so much love and common life goals among these diverse people who are originally strangers to one another? Of special interest is one comment by a member ('Lady Fa Fa') above, 'Love Dae Jang-geum, love the website, love the earth'. We propose that apart from the personal qualities (beauty, love, intelligence, perseverance, etc.) embodied by the female protagonist (Jang-geum) of the drama, it is more importantly the eu-topian social imaginary embodied by her and the social universe of the drama that is at work here: it is the alternative social imaginary that inspires and permeates the social relations and actions of the members of this virtual community: loving the female protagonist extends to loving this fangroup website and then further extends to loving the earth. It seems that it is more than just an ideal person that they love, but the ideal social imaginary embodied by the ideal person and the social universe that she inhabits. However, of course, we can still find fault with this social universe: it is male-dominated symbolically with a male 'emperor' at the top, and yet at least to many of the members, the 'emperor' seems to be more in the role of a modern webmaster or forum organizer than a real 'autocrat'.

We propose that there are at least three basic components of this social imaginary as embodied by Jang-geum and social universe of the drama: (1) the possibility of pure, long-lasting, sacrificial love between a man and a woman; (2) the possibility of a social universe with compassion, as embodied in the Chinese saying 'you-qing tian-di', which can be translated as: 'a sky and earth with compassion', which is alternative to the Western modern imaginary of objectification and abstraction (see Poovey 2002); and (3) the possibility of social justice, fairness, and social mobility based on a person's perseverance and hard work. Due to limited space we cannot elaborate the components of this social imaginary here (please see Lin and Kim 2005). We do see that members in this virtual community do often draw on the social imaginary of the drama in their messages to express their life goals, their social relations (e.g. seeing other members of the virtual community as family members supporting one another) and their ways of

dealing with life's difficulties (e.g. a student faced with a daunting public exam said she will 'never give up' just like Jang-geum).

If in traditional times religions provided the more lasting social imaginaries to enable people to see the world as amenable to changing into a better place, in modern times it might be some TV dramas that can provide such 'eu-topian' social imaginaries that help people to believe that the world is still amenable to their efforts for making it a better place, if not in the off-line society, then at least in an on-line, virtual society that they co-construct. Nevertheless, as no off-line ethnographic observations/interviews have been conducted in this study, it is hard to say whether and how the social imaginaries observed in cyberspace might also have an impact in the off-line world of these participants. Future studies can consider doing participant observation (in offline activities) and in-depth interviews with the online drama fans, which can provide some insights on the potential off-line impact of the virtual community.

The social imaginaries provided by some TV dramas, perhaps like those provided by religion, can motivate people to go out of their ways to live a 'good life' and to create a 'good place' somewhere (e.g. in a small fellowship, or in a virtual community as in this case) no matter how limited and transient that place might seem to be. Although cultural critics can point out the fantasy or utopian nature of such social imaginaries, the actual social experience, communicative practice, huge amount of affective energies generated, and the textual creativity and productiveness of people inspired by these social imaginaries can have real-life effects on these people, as in the case of the virtual community described here: they seem to be happier, they re-affirm their life goals, they experience a social universe of familial warmth, compassion and support, they are apprenticed into the modes of communicative sociality and rationality and in the process seem to be acquiring the cultural capital required of citizenship in a modern society.

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Appendix:

Table 1: Duties of the Court Departments

Department	Duties
Imperial Decree	This is a section for the chief forum to post rules, regulations and guidelines to members.
Palace Parlor	Other Internet discussion groups can apply for 'on-line alliances' here. The term 'alliance' refers to establishing hyperlinks on the main page to the 'ally' websites.
Public Court	This is a place for complaints and conflict settlement. Members who are dissatisfied with the penalties could 'appeal' to the senior officials.
Police Department	A list of 'warned members' is updated each day/each week in this department. The web-master will list out the reasons for punishment and the form of punishment.
Clinic	This is a section dealing with technical issues. The chief forum master will help members solve the problems, or teach them how to tackle the problems.
Recruitment Centre	A place for recruiting webmaster and diplomats. 'Diplomats' are responsible for forming on-line alliances with other web groups.

ⁱ English title 'Jewel in the Palace', first aired in South Korea in Autumn 2003 by MBC, 54 episodes.

ⁱⁱ This observation is made based on the content of their messages, and the self-reported age group in certain voting sections.