

**Belonging and diaspora:
The Chinese and the Internet****by Loong Wong****Abstract**

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The Internet has become a new global phenomenon, enlarging new democratic discourse and has helped to foster new empowerment and learning experiences. It has also been argued that the Internet can be used for social and political mobilisation. In the case of ethnic groups, the Internet can be used to create new communities or to re-create past knowledges, enabling the maintenance and cultural reproduction of "old" communities. In the case of the Chinese community, it has been pointed out that the Internet while has been useful in creating a Chinese presence, it nonetheless privileges essentialism and communal hegemony. This has been specifically the point made by some cultural theorists. In their study of the Chinese and Chinese-ness, cultural studies theorists have criticised the hegemonic formation implicit in discussions of the Chinese. They point out that the search by diasporic Chinese for an authentic Chinese meaning is inherently flawed and futile. In deconstructing the notion of Chinese and Chinese-ness, they argue that identities are contingent, often multiple and evolving. This paper takes seriously this criticism proffered by cultural theorists. It seeks to examine and locate their claims in the context of the relationship between diasporic politics, communalism and the

Internet. The paper starts with a brief overview of the Chinese diaspora; it next examines the relationship between the new information and communication technologies and the Chinese diaspora. It will also look at how this new technology is shaping and changing the way Chinese diasporic lives are experienced. In so doing, it examines the claims advanced by cultural theorists, in particular their analysis of identity and its relationship with diasporic politics and essentialism.

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Introduction

Globalisation brings home to us communities and identities are indeed fragile entities. Once stable and homogenised, nation-states now find themselves permeated with differences. As the nation-state becomes more integrated and transformed as part of a global

economy, the nature of this global economic thrust ensures significant shifts in capital and populations: immigration and border crossings become common practices as global capitalism seeks to maximise its competitive advantage vis-à-vis the different nation-states. To remain competitive, these nations introduced major cultural changes in work practices and unwittingly, also in the cultural representations of themselves, their products, nations and states. The spread and use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) further augmented and accelerated this process, prompting one analyst to suggest that "social meaning evaporates from places, and therefore from society" [1]. This will prompt resistance and resentment and individuals will grope for and reaffirm a sense of familiarity, seeking to preserve some semblance of normality and control over their work and residence in "the midst of the abstraction of (this) new historical landscape" [2]. In the face of the fault lines of this ever melting present, displaced, dislocated and immigrant communities will use their "memory of place to construct imaginatively their new lived world" [3] enabling them to foster and create a sense of order, familiarity and control.

This diasporic condition is seen as the norm for contemporary societies as they engage the globalised economy and is enthusiastically celebrated by some post-colonial writers. As one influential proponent puts it, "For the demography of the new internationalism is the history of the postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile and the grim purpose of political and economic refugees" [4]. Thus, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and hybridity have all become part of the new language of analysis and act as the new defining signifiers of change of the present postmodern condition

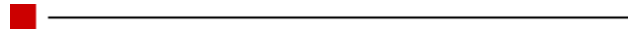
(Chambers, 1994; Clifford, 1994; Cheah, 1998). For these postmodern subscribers, diasporas are affirmative validations of "an increasing proliferation of subnational and transnational identities that cannot easily be contained in the nation-state system" [5]. Drawing on their new and novel theoretical apparatuses predicated on the diasporic condition — deterritoriality, heterogeneity and hybridity — these theorists argue that new cultural attachments beyond those of national identities have been formed and are forming and the nation-state is in terminal crisis. They also argue that the accompanying new emergent practices augmented by the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer possible new and seductive futures as they relate to global citizenship practices and claims (Lumby, 1999; Camilleri and Falk, 1992; Lavie and Swedenburg, 1991).

In this paper, I examine the phenomenon and process of diaspora, specifically that of the Chinese diaspora. It is apparent that current globalism has radically transformed many contemporary social and cultural practices. It has melted away many taken-for-granted norms and practices and issues of the self; agency, belonging and identities are re-examined. At the same time, via the Internet, new forms of conviviality, civility and communion are made possible. A new, democratic and transnational politics is envisaged where we can transcend our bounded selves. In the case of the diasporic Chinese, this is both challenging and exciting; it foreshadows an ability to (re)construct themselves and draw on their kin for a sense of communion. Critics, however, argue that while the Internet has been useful in creating a Chinese presence, it nonetheless reifies an essentialist Chinese identity. They point out that the search by diasporic Chinese for an authentic Chinese meaning is inherently flawed and futile. In deconstructing the notion of Chinese and

Chinese-ness, they argue that identities are contingent, often multiple and evolving.

This paper seriously considers this criticism. It seeks to examine the efficacy of this critique through an examination of the relationship between Chinese diasporic politics, communalism, nationalism and the Internet. The paper starts with a brief overview of the Chinese diaspora and the identities it has spawned. The paper next examines the notion of Chinese-ness and the issues of essentialism and nationalism as framed in the discourse of Chinese-ness. It suggests that in their eagerness to bury nationalism and essentialism, postmodern theorists are also guilty of practising selective essentialism to prosecute their case. It also suggests that in de-constructing Chinese-ness, they privilege differences and search for and reify really a non-existent Chinese-ness. More often than not, ethnic identities are situational and contingent. Diasporic Chinese ethnic communities can deploy a range of strategies to manage their identities, often manifest multiple identities and are clearly not strait-jacketable as our postmodern theorists have claimed. The paper next discusses new ICTs and their ability to shape and change the way Chinese diasporic lives are experienced. This suggests that diasporic Chinese communities can and may continue to pursue this multiple-identity path as their forebears. Postmodern theorists, on the other hand, seem to be intent on developing their theoretical enterprise and fail to acknowledge historical and material realities impacting on communities and identities. Their privileging of a radical choice via the consumption of market identities suggest that their preoccupation with the search for differences confines their analyses. This singular and rather monistic intent also mask prevailing inequalities and unwittingly, they may be the new

emblems/handmaidens of global capitalism — nomadic, transient, rootless, flexible, individualistic and market-oriented.



Of diaspora and the Chinese

The concept of diaspora has been employed by various ethnic groups in describing their condition. They see themselves as being dispersed across countries either relatively voluntarily or through force, and that somehow they are intrinsically linked in the quest of a homeland, either as in a physical territory or as an imagined community. It has become a metaphoric designation for different categories of individuals. As Safran puts it, it now includes "expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities tout court" [6]. Such a broad definition makes the distinction between diaspora and migrant settings superficial to a considerable extent. In a recent paper, Tololyan [7] expressed some reservations over such a broad use of the term, which is increasingly turned into a "promiscuously captious category that is taken to include all the adjacent phenomena to which it is linked but from which it actually differs in ways that are constitutive, that in fact make a viable definition of diaspora possible". Whilst Tololyan is right in pointing to the inherent dangers in such expansive definitions, they nonetheless reflects possibly the nature and range of current diasporic formations as nation-states enmeshed themselves with the globalisation process.

The term "Chinese diaspora" has become a major research area and of interest to businesses and politicians. For the former, it suggests massive amounts of capital and an extremely large market; for the latter, a potential internal China — acting in conjunction with mainland Chinese interests — is seen as tantamount to subversion and threatening. In the main, the Chinese diaspora refers to migrants who originated in areas falling within the territorial boundaries of contemporary China. Historically, the Chinese has traveled abroad for trade and religious reasons. Buddhist pilgrims traveled to parts of Central, South and East Asia, and the various Chinese dynasties have had both trade and diplomatic contacts with various parts of Southeast, Central and East Asia. These historical contacts are of course, different from those emanating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when both political and economic aspirations became more salient. The opening up of China, the crisis in Qing China, the gold finds in the U.S. and Australia and the coming to power of the Chinese Communist Party set off successive waves of migration. The 1989 Tienanmen massacre and the inflow of Chinese students to the west in the 1990s further signaled another critical and distinct wave of migration — professional and economic reasons came to define the reasons for emigrating.

Today, overseas Chinese communities are found in literally most countries of the world, ranging from Calcutta to the West Indies, and they have made significant economic, social and political impact in many of these places. Inevitably, the issue of their identities and loyalties arise as nation-states viewed them with great suspicion; they feared this primal urge of recalling and being pressed into the service of a powerful, threatening China. At its core, this view privileges a fixed, singular identity frozen in the mists

of time and that diasporic Chinese are in effect "sleepers" to be activated by some remote, cryptic and mythical code. But as numerous writers have argued, identities are constantly struggled over, changing, proclaimed and mobilised. The outcome is not predetermined but reflects a political contest over the exercise of power and meanings. Indeed, various studies have point out that diasporic Chinese communities have followed distinct paths of development and acquired identities that are different from each other.

Indeed, this is exactly what Peter Gosling (1983) found in his study of the Chinese in Southeast Asia. According to him, they adopted a range of identity management strategies, from adaptation to accommodation, acculturation to assimilation to negotiate their positions in different host countries. The extent to which diasporic Chinese assume their different identities depends largely on the delicate balance between them as a group and the social and political climate in their host societies. This is also moderated by the respective regional, linguistic and religious variations amongst the various migrating Chinese communities; the additional components of gender, class, sexuality, age and generation identifications further add to the diversity of these diasporas. Similarly, Wang (1991) was able to find among Southeast Asian Chinese the co-presence of multiple identities which include local national identity, communal identity (very important in Malaysia where the Chinese constitutes about 30 percent of the population), ethnic identity, nationalist identity (that promoted and nurtured by Chinese nationalist governments), past-oriented historical identity (based on the view of the great Chinese civilisation), cultural identity (often referred to as "Chinese-ness") and class identity. Wang also suggests that these identities can be and have been

manipulated by state powers to accommodate the state's preferred agenda and also to discipline the native population. An examination of immigration policies in Australia (and many parts of the "developed west") reveals a remarkable continuity in that Chinese immigrants are welcomed insofar as they fit into the preferred state's economic agenda of development — as economic migrants, and also to keep the "local" and restless population in line.

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Clearly, there is no singular experience of the Chinese diaspora except that it is a fairly recent phenomenon and rooted in modernity. It is facilitated by modern transport and communication and has spread rapidly; it is also experienced quite differently. Despite this, postmodern analysts have developed, maintained and reified a Chinese-ness, enabling them to proffer rather compelling critiques of an imagined homogenous Chinese community and China. Clearly, there is validity in their criticisms of an imagined constant, unwavering, unchanging Chinese-ness but where they err is in part due to their conflating of community, ethnicity and nationalism (despite their sensitivities to reject totality and closure). They also mis-read the histories of both China and the diasporic overseas Chinese communities. In the next few sections, I will examine some of these arguments and subject them to a critical interrogation.



Consuming passions: China, essentialism and Chinese-ness

In discussions of the Chinese, Chinese identity has been assumed to be a homogenous whole and is derivative of China, its history and traditions. This received wisdom of China is itself contentious, veering from two extremes. There is the traditional empire based on cosmic correspondences, governed by means of a principle of homology whereby every level of state and society merely repeated in more or less exalted or debased form, a core set of rituals of dominance and subservience and the equally exaggerated modern one. In the latter, China is a modern, nationalistic state controlled by a rigid totalitarian Leninist party. These two views leave no or little room for resistance and clearly shows that the imagined homogenous China is a problematic discourse.

A number of writers have actually pointed out that our received view of China mystifies and hides the real content of China. The quest of a unitary state, was, however, both powerful and seductive; it "relegated memories of affective community to the realm of the irrational and the pre-modern, and reduced the people of China to a functional desideratum of national state-building" [8]. The Chinese people, became no more than the mass referent of the state which purported to represent them, and yet this state has been contested and takes different forms, from a feudal empire to a communist regime. Indeed, there are different forms of Chinese nations (Townsend, 1992) and they involve competing, contested

narratives of the origin and direction of the nation (Duara, 1993; Fitzgerald, 1994; 1996).

And yet the idea of an all-powerful centre in China is all pervasive and continuous although misleading (Jenner, 1992; Tu, 1991). Its peripheries, in particular, the north, south and west have always been peripheral, autonomous and incorporated selectively in the service of "Chinese-ness" (Levenson, 1970). It has also been pointed out that the history of China shows a remarkable tendency to cope with, manage and discipline the different elements that constitute a threat to China. The Chinese state has employed a range of strategies ranging from outright conquest and control, negotiated peace, settlement to yielding, but only to assimilate them, as in the case of the Mongols and the Manchus.

Chinese-ness is, therefore, not a natural excretion of a genealogical tree, but a continual struggle along multiple historical and social nodes through a negotiation of the inescapable tension between secure definitions and a consciousness of the oppressions that such definitions rest upon. It is still forming, partial, provides a redemptive psychic locus, a movement towards solidarity, towards belonging and invests the idea of an original "Chinese-ness" an authenticity, an enhanced aura and clearly desired by many of its diasporic subjects and others.

In immigrant Chinese societies, however, many Chinese immigrants seek to recreate their timeless and authentic China. In taking culture to be an assortment of fragmentary but clearly definable practices and customs, they see the preservation of such cultural essence as a domain that can and needs to be defended against outside intervention: this is the area where one must stay

ever-vigilant against contamination by Western values. For the immigrant, these customs became defining moments as they signify, pronounce and declare their being. Thus, community events, such as festivals play an important role as these events become the space which marks and controls the face of national culture in the family of Chinese immigrants; it proclaims their Chinese-ness, their being. It also renders and invokes the myth of the one big happy, unified Chinese family, reaffirming the existence of an essential Chinese eternal universality in the community.

Cloaked in this essentialist garb, it sets about manufacturing/recreating a community in its own image derived from a nominated eternal ancient Chinese spirit/essence. Through this essence, the Chinese, whether immigrant or still resident in China, seeks to anonymously eternalise its own existence. These terms of cultural preservation and negotiation are, in part, driven by the continual threat of the contamination and universalising nature of western culture, in part, the need for a "defensive" community, and in part, a quest for a equally enviable and powerful alternative (Chinese) identity via an alternative economic development model. This idealised Chinese-ness is, however, quarantined from the "current of history", resulting in the construction of a reified Chinese-ness. This process can be very disempowering as it "dislocates" the immigrants from their present and "relocates" disciplines — fixing them into an idealised past contiguous with the future.

This appropriation of customs, divorced from their historical context, as Frantz Fanon has argued, can lead only to an objectification that is ultimately against a positive transformation of history. As he puts it, "Culture has never the translucidity of custom: it abhors all

simplification. In its essence it is opposed to custom, for custom is always the deterioration of culture. The desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one's own people" [9]. Fanon accordingly rejects those customs which arise out of objectification and which finally oppose "one's own people".

Fanon's critique is clearly discernable in diasporic Chinese communities. Under pressure by its "leaders" to present an image of homogeneity and internal discipline, "traditional" Chinese-ness is invoked and then pressed into the service of an imagined culture politically subordinated to the project of being a model minority in a culturally plural nation-state e.g. Australia and the U.S. This model of "Chinese-ness" also helps explain the selective amnesia in the Chinese immigrant's memory of the history of their communities. In the case of Australia, it privileges the successful, educated, urban professional whilst marginalising the workers and any radical immigrant Chinese culture, especially those informed by an explicit anti-imperialist politics and an awareness of the international scope of western (especially British) imperialism at that time. In all likelihood, the pre-1950s immigrant consciousness is probably more radical than the consciousness that predominates amongst the diasporic Chinese communities resident today. First, they seemed aware of the global grip of imperialism and second, they had an appreciation of the dispersed nature of the Chinese immigrant communities in Southeast Asia, Europe, the Caribbean and the U.S. Third, they were Chinese nationalists whose country was carved out and in turmoil: they needed diasporic support not only to facilitate emigration, but also to raise funds for their communities at home and also to form alternative nationalist and

support movements of their own. Fourthly, they rallied together in response to prevailing racism. In any case, the rhetoric and activities of these pre-1950 immigrants reveal a consciousness of economic power, racial politics and imperialism but unfortunately, this historical memory is purged and cleansed in favour of a mobile, model community. This loss of historical memory also seriously limits the Chinese immigrants' response to other communities who continue to face more virulent forms of racism e.g. the native American-Indian populations in Canada and U.S. and the Aborigines in Australia. And believing its own rhetoric of "success" as a model minority, it also fails to perceive racism towards itself, and almost oblivious of power and ideology which is crucial to its understanding of its own history.

Politics, for these diasporic communities, is in the main, constructed and played around an array of racial categorisations based on biological and cultural essentialisms e.g. the search for the ever authentic and more real Chinese appears to be a perennial concern amongst the Chinese communities; alternatively, it involves a rejection of a Chinese identity. This fictional imagining marks a desire for validation and is clearly political. It involves a mobilisation of a social bias which is then recalibrated and pressed into the service of its protagonists and played out in the public arena. This interplay and contest constricts the ability of immigrant and diasporic Chinese to articulate for themselves an alternative discourse. As captives of the privileged Chinese discourse, they find themselves constantly monitored, regulated and inducted into an objectified and imagined community, which overlooks the fields of relations in which their displacement is constituted. This reading of the Chinese diaspora, however, suggests the lack of reflexivity and agency, and clearly ignores the "currents of history".



"Inventing" essentialism, identities and nationalism

Too often, critics of identities equate the (re)discovery of "ethnic" identities by diasporic communities as reactive and symptomatic of the primordial calling of the nation. In one sense, that is true as nation-states traditionally confers upon its subjects identities but it may also be the font of "ethereal wisdom" and enjoyable [10]. They fulfil our emotional functions allowing us to "escape from triviality" [11], and also provide us with "a pervasive system of social classification", an organising "principle of vision and division" of the social world, a standardised scheme of social accounting, an interpretative grid for public discussion, a set of boundary-markers, a legitimate form for public and private identities, and "a ready-made template for claims to sovereignty" [12]. These relations, as various critics point out, foster the concept of an imagined homeland and can engender volatility, violence, exclusivity and a retreat into fundamentalism (Hobsbawm, 1990; Ignatieff, 1994), pre-empting the possibility of any meaningful "cross-cultural" dialogue or social intercourse.

In criticising this imagined whole, as represented by the national homeland, postmodern critics, claim that purity, authenticity and essence are not sustainable as the borders between cultures/races/sexes flagrantly imagined and socially constructed, blur or disappear under sustained scientific and theoretical analysis. There are too many crossings and contamination. Indeed,

these critics point to those living on the margins — the border-crossers, the immigrants, the diasporic, the hybrids — as proof of the unhinging of static differences. Coerced subscription to a rigidly coded set of behaviour, appearances or lineages in order to effect an authentic voice within or of a community, they claim, necessitates some form of repressive violence against the contradictions and uncomfortable realities of identity politics (Chatterjee and Pandey, 1992). They point out that both "natural" essentialism (the idea that race or woman-ness or community is simply an inherited and metaphysically inevitable practice and reality) and political essentialism (idea of belonging or consciousness, leading to a specific form of political practice) privileged categorical and rather exclusive politics which can be liberating (for some) but is also politically disempowering for others. This is a powerful critique but to suggest that identities are eternally fixed essentialist positions clearly overstates the case. Stuart Hall, for example, has argued that it is a travesty to deny that identities occur in a historical vacuum; they have histories. These histories, as Hall elaborates, "undergo constant transformation" and that it is important to recognise the "different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past" [13]. As such, rather than rejecting essentialism *in toto*, essentialism may be deployed or activated, having some strategic or interventionary value (Fuss, 1989; Lowe, 1991).

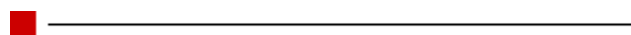
Proponents of a diasporic discourse in their haste to welcome and usher in the rather seductive postmodern contention of the withering away of nation-states and the possibility of an alternative identity, still yearn for a sense of belonging. Hybrid categories and diasporic identities become their coda of belonging. They fail to recognise that diasporas are rarely claims against nation-states but

are often attempts seeking engagement with the "homeland"; they often seek to participate, contribute and collude in national imaginings, national consciousness and national identities which are constantly refracted through the dialectic between the past and the present.

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While ostensibly critical of "essentialist" claims, postmodern critics are equally susceptible to and make essentialist claims. For example, in equating ethnic identities with nationally-defined ones, they are a little cavalier and economic with their claims. They fail to see that ethnic identities may, as Barth (1969) has suggested, be constructed and maintained around a range of signifiers articulating in varying combinations under specific conditions. These conditions are varied and may include a belief in common ancestry, claims to a shared history that gives shape to feelings of shared struggles and shared destinies, attachment to a "homeland" which may or not coincide with the place of residence, and as sense of belonging to a group with a shared language, religion or social customs and traditions. In other words, ethnicity is not some objective criterion of cultural difference but relational, subject to temporal, social, economic and political conditions. As historical products, bonds of ethnicity may shift in meaning. They may be strengthened, weakened or dissolved and will have varied salience at different points in an individual's or a group's biography.

Seen this way, ethnicity cannot be merely defined in terms of ancestral claims nor packaged territorial boundaries; they are instead mediated lived experiences of a community. National identity, on the other hand, privileges space and is a technique employed by the nation-state to forge an identity, combining discourses and other disciplinary institutions to effect a congruence between self-representation and those of the contours of the preferred national identity. It seeks to suppress competing traditions, representations and may smuggle in or invent "traditions" to confer a sense of timeless and continuous belonging (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Gellner, 1983). This contradiction is constantly played out but it does not necessarily follow that all proclamations of ethnic identities are also declarations of nation-states and national interests; indeed, many contemporary societies have demonstrated that they can co-exist — in Singapore, Australia, the U.S. — amongst other countries.



Globalisation, ICTs and the Chinese diaspora

In this age of new technologies and rapid communications, the rise of computer-mediated communication has and is creating communities in cyberspace where "like-minded" people are able to relate, bond and interact with each other across space and time (Rheingold, 1993; Jones, 1995). This cyberspace is a "worldwide computer-mediated communication network where words and graphics are shared, and friendships and power relations are

manifested" [14]. Cybercommunitiesâ protagonists argue that ICTs offers an alternative information and relation network enabling relation-ness and connectivity amongst its participants. It renders the possibility of an imagined community where participants are able to immerse themselves in and craft their own sense of belonging-ness. The sense of camaraderie, consciousness and identity engendered is empowering, affirming and "pleasurable" (Lumby, 1999; Sun, 2000). In the case of diasporic communities, cyberspace allows them on the one hand, to transcend their isolation, their nostalgia, their displacement and their pain of dislocation and on the other, to mobilise and form themselves culturally and politically as they re-construct their space, place, connection-ness and sense of home. This is facilitated through the articulation, re-telling and (re)construction of shared pasts, histories, stories and memories. Via the repetitive deployment of these strategies, home is experienced, recreated and experienced, enabling a sense of continuity, familiarity, communality and community.

The Chinese digital diaspora via various both personal Web pages and institutional and/or commercial sites thus tellingly reconstructs and reproduces an elaborate system of social, cultural, religious and professional organisations, all of which coalesce around ideas of commonality of origins and present lives, shared culture and heritage, and common goals and desires. Chinese customs, traditions, religious practices, histories, restaurants, foods, films and other Chinese products usher in a familiarity and naturalise it. Community is invoked — albeit an imagined one — but nonetheless symptomatic of the need to create cultural and social alliances that foster a sense of identity in the wake and tide of dispersement, displacement unleashed through the process of

globalisation. For instance, the Web site for Chinese News Digest (www.cnd.org) now operates globally. Started in North America, today, it operates across all continents, offers five weekly English publications (CND-Global News, CND-US Regional, CND-Canada regional, CND-Europe/Pacific, China Internet News Letter), one Chinese magazine (*Hua Xia Wen Zhai*) and a database. In the database, one finds a virtual museum of the "Cultural Revolution", a Fairbanks memorial Chinese History Virtual Library; photo archives about the Nanjing Massacre; records of the 1989 Tienanmen Event; an alumni service, a job center and a technical help for Chinese software. Maintained by volunteers and as a non-profit outfit, it has become "home" and a "spiritual food station" for many of its subscribers and participants. There are also, of course other public avenues e.g. huaren.org and newsgroups such as SocCulture.China, Talk.Politics.China, Alt.Chinese.Text and China.Chat enabling forums and chats to be conducted and ideas to be shared. Most of these sites create a naturalised space of "China" on the Web and tend to pose Chinese identity as isomorphic with an imagined, unitary China. In this virtual space, China and Chinese-ness are translated into artifacts — consumable and pleasurable.

And yet a closer examination of these sites reveals some interesting contradictions. For example, protagonists in the interactive discussion forum run by CND shows a framing of a critique of China from a reworking of American liberal discourse. China is contested and can only be redeemed by an American political liberalism. America became for discussants, the state and benchmark of modernity and progress while China lives in its past and is perpetually catching up. On the other hand, in discussions of Sino-American relations, most discussants argue for Chinese

exceptionalism and a Chinese model of development. In addition, many are also critical of America's seemingly democratic practices alluding to racial discrimination and prevailing social injustices. These contradictory positions enable the dominant discourses to be problematised and an alternative discourse of freedom and liberation deployed, but as yet, alternative discourses are stunted and subordinated to the logic of the master "China" narrative.

Many of these sites unwittingly allude to an insider-outsider dichotomy, especially in its privileging of "mainland" Chinese events and issues; there is often an assumed knowledge and familiarity with it (such as the Tiananmen incident and the the in-jokes surrounding China's recent past). Language and Chinese software further distinguish and categorise differences amongst the Chinese participants accessing the sites. And yet in its production of a Chinese-ness and a Chinese identity, it glosses over regional differences in culture, cuisines and customs in China and of course, critically, the overseas Chinese communities dispersed globally. There is an erasure of differences amongst the various Chinese communities; there is an assumed Chinese commonality, a shared common history and clearly the "Chinese selves" produced in this digital diaspora are very different from identities within the larger global Chinese community or for that matter, China itself. A strategically "pure", collective identity is enabled and facilitated through these new ICTs as a response and as a means of coming to terms with a material identity, marked by difference, multiplicity and fragmentation. The nation-state which many theorists argue is passé in the age of transborder crossers and fragmented identities, is revisited and re-inoculated into these diasporic yearnings; they "create powerful attachment to ideas of homeland that seem more deeply territorial than ever" [15].

Far from dissipating, essentialism, nationalism and identities maybe revived and even become resurgent in our post-national globalised, digital era (Duara, 1995). Recent examples whereby Chinese were believed to be threatened, discriminated against, aggrieved e.g. the Wen Hon Lee case in the U.S. and the issues of the foot-and-mouth disease in the U.K. (which a politician attributes to the Chinese community's import of food from Hong Kong or China) and that of the Indonesian Chinese, all suggest a pan-global mobilisation of "Chinese" people to redress these grievances. Some critics have suggested that this resurgence of identities via the deployment of some mythical essentialism (Chinese-ness) is regressive. Others see this "long-distance nationalism" as inevitably non-responsible — our hero will not have to answer for, or pay the price of, the long-distance politics he undertakes. He is also easy prey for shrewd political manipulators [16]. While there may be an element of truth in that identities can be manipulated by shrewd and unscrupulous politicians, it does not necessarily follow that asserting and reclaiming one's identity is tantamount to a subscription of and conscription to a "nationalist" interpellation. In the cases cited above, some may rally to the cause because of their "Chinese-ness" whilst others do so for other political reasons. To merely equate responses to such narrow, exclusive "blood" politics is unnecessarily reductionist and may express both an anxiety and problems with the theoretical premises of the new "diasporic" project.

In his study of "nationalist" discourse, Chatterjee (1993) has poignantly reminded us of the contradiction between community and nation. According to him, in the West, capitalist relations have come to invest and dominate the public sphere so much so that the only possible imaginable disciplining, homogenising community has

become the nation-state. Transplanted in "non-western" societies, it has been extremely disruptive and violent, spawning alternative discourses evident in many anti-colonial movements. They have rejected this idea of a homogenising community but on independence, these have lapsed or subsumed under the aegis of nation-building projects. It does not, however, mean that all communities can only be nationalist; what it does show is that nationalism can hijack communities and press them into its service but this is not an automatic process. This is clearly discernable on the Web.

Many digital Chinese Web sites e.g. www.dimsum.org.uk, www.chinatownsdney.com, whose primary audiences are the Chinese communities that live in their respective locales, certainly espouse a sense of community but they do not manifest a desire, yearning or a professed loyalty for China. They act as bulletin boards, and in providing information and analyses of local and global events, they attempt to draw together very specific notions of community that involve sharing the same physical and digital space and time. These sites foster a sense of community as in the real world and seeks to promote or defend interests of its local community when these interests are threatened or challenged, as in the real world where resources and people are mobilised to protect their interests. Their independence and autonomy demonstrate that they are not transmission belts conveying the "Chinese nation" project; they may indeed be critical of such aspirations and have their own agendas. Deterritorialised as these communities are, via the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), they enable spatially extended relations to be maintained, routinise and facilitate both dialogue and input into the community. There is a simultaneous engagement with different

social practices and are no longer nation and/or space-bound. It may revive ethnic identities, rejuvenate a new politics of nationhood or bring forth a new cultural politics of belonging which may create new affiliations and foster a new sense of communion. These different trajectories jostle and compete for domination, mediated by the new agent, "consumer-subject," spawning different political claims on the structure and practices of the global capitalist economy (Wallerstein, 1991).



Conclusion

Globalisation has clearly challenged existing social theories and brought into its wake new theorisings but as Barbara Christian reminds us, in "the race for theory, we need to be conscious for whom are we doing what we are doing" [17]. Postmodernists have celebrated contemporary cultural tendencies, reveling in its plots of exile, hybridity, indeterminacy, play, deracinations, diasporas, travels and a host of other seductive new possibilities. The Internet with its phantasmic possibility of playing with an identity amplifies the postmodern imaginary. But these postmodernist claims are a little extravagant. While their constructions and the Internet allow for "more pleasant" identity constructs via the fluid play of esteem and self-esteem, the modes of representation alluded to are partial. "Structures of domination", as Hooks points out are "deflected by an emphasis on seduction and longing" [18]. Embedded in an individuated liberal market discourse, identities for these theorists become no more than a matter of "consumer sovereignty", choice

and the consummation of desire rather than an act of political power. In underestimating and downplaying the foundational inequality of market exchange and the international division of labour (not all labour enjoys the same mobility), they also unwittingly mystify the real content of the diasporic experience: colonial violence, imperialism, rape, exploitation and genocidal slaughter together with the protean resistance of their victims. This "ontological imperialism", as Robert Young terms it, effectively neutralises the efficacy of the "Other" by encompassing it [19]. The seemingly innocent, sensible and innocuous tactics employed ensure their greater purchase and enthrone theory as a new hegemonic consumptive entity; socio-political action, on the other hand, is neutralised and relegated to the margins in a hierarchy of individualistic commitment. Arguably, such postmodern injunctions can be seen as a refurbishing and reification of the liberal capitalist market ethos (Jameson, 1991; Chatterjee, 1993).


This is not to say that there is no value in studying diasporic communities and their varied experiences. In studying diasporic communities and the Web, some important issues are brought into focus enabling new debates and dialogues. The first concerns the notion of the diasporic experience of the migrant identity. This is especially evident in the make up of the Web pages, the links, the chatrooms and the forums, especially those surrounding culture and traditions. Claims of greater access to authenticity are repeatedly invoked, denying other experiences or the possible articulation of another Chinese self/community. Clearly, culture is contested and struggled over constantly. The Web amplifies this struggle and imagining; it enables identities to be experienced and imagined in very immediate and quotidian ways e.g. through reading the latest headlines from China's major newspapers,

debating the political scene in China, discussing Sino-American relations on defence, responding to a review and a posting of a Chinese movie or following the histrionics of a particular actor. It is these shared practices that enable the diaspora to create and critique its idea of community and home.

The second issue concerns the nature of the political economy of the Internet. Not only is it booming and becoming a key industry but many Chinese are actively involved and investing in it. Many of these technopreneurs are mobilising interests and utilising the Internet to also cater and manufacture services for diasporic, displaced and elite Chinese. This political economy of interest is under-studied but clearly potent in mobilising support and bias. The constructed digital national identity provides us with a land in which we are at home, a history which is ours, and a privileged access to a vast heritage of culture and creativity. It not only provides us with the means to understand this heritage; it also assures us that it is ours. It provides us with a range of resources, makes available a fund of meanings, pleasures and rewards beyond anything that we are likely to find in our individual lives. It allows us to transcend ourselves and envision a collective being, a collective will and that we are part of a greater mission, outcome, a moral agenda. We become pronounced once and for all through the nation and rejoice in its achievements. Indeed, as various writers have shown, they can establish powerful networks, are major transnational actors and can easily politicise cross-national issues and establish cross-national obligations and responsibilities (Van Hear, 1998; Anthias, 1998; Anderson, 1994; Tololyan, 1996), foster some form of "long distance nationalism" or "diasporic capitalism" (Nonini and Ong, 1997; Dirlik, 1996). Clearly, diasporic identities can be manipulated,

distilled and service the interests of particular segments but this is an on-going contested process.

The Internet because of its relatively easy access and low costs has been touted as a revolutionary and liberating tool to open up channels of information exchange and new political space.

Disempowered groups and individuals are able to publish their views and claim their identity through the Internet unlike previously. But as has been pointed out, the matrix of both the production and representation of information are potent screens and props in this articulation of the representation of solidarity. Claims to full and true democracy may be premature. Be that as it may, cybercommunities have enable people to participate in a form of belonging with others which may not require that we all feel as one or that we have a common origin or only speak the same language but that there is a network of relations found between the self and others which can be and are held together through shared exchanges. These relationships are never total but indeterminate and slippery, and often simultaneously local and global. Because of this import, there is a need to critically engage in the debates surrounding culture, cyber-identities, diasporic identities and long-distance nationalism. A failure to do so may result in it being captive of a homogenising, transnational elite discourse sponsored by global capitalism. 

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Notes

1. Castells, 1989, p. 349.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
3. Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, p. 11.
4. Bhabha, 1995, pp. 5.
5. Cohen, 1996.
6. Safran, 1991, p. 83.
7. Tololyan, 1996, p. 8.
8. Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 43.
9. Fanon. 1968, p. 224.
10. Zizek, 1997, p. 37.
11. Minogue, 1967, p. 32.
12. Brubaker, 1996, p. 24.
13. Hall, 1990, p. 225.
14. Kramarae, 1995, p. 38.
15. Appadurai, 1996, p. 177.

16. Anderson, 1992, p. 13; see also Tay, 2000.

17. Christian, 1990, p. 47; see also Chen, 1998.

18. Hooks, 1992, p. 25.

19. Young, 1990, p. 13.

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Editorial history

Paper received 13 February 2003; accepted 20 March 2003.

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Belonging and diaspora: The Chinese and the Internet by Loong
Wong

First Monday, volume 8, number 4 (April 2003),

URL: http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue8_4/wong/index.html