



**CENTER FOR
Global Studies**

Project on Global Migration and Transnational Politics

ISSN 1941-7586

Sons of The Yellow Emperor Go Online: The State of the Chinese Digital Diaspora

Sheng Ding
Associate Professor of Political Science
Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania

The Center for Global Studies at George Mason University was founded to promote multidisciplinary research on globalization. The Center comprises more than 100 associated faculty members whose collective expertise spans the full range of disciplines. The Center sponsors CGS Working Groups, publishes the Global Studies Review, and conducts research on a broad range of themes.

The Project on Global Migration and Transnational Politics, a partnership between CGS and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, investigates how political dynamics around the globe have been transformed by new patterns of human mobility and the development of innovative transnational social networks. The project sponsors research workshops, working papers, and conferences that all focus on developing a new research agenda for understanding how global migration has transformed politics.

WEB: cgs.gmu.edu

ISSN 1941-7586

Sons of The Yellow Emperor Go Online: The State of the Chinese Digital Diaspora

Sheng Ding

Associate Professor of Political Science
Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania

***Abstract:** In the global information age, an increasing number of the Chinese diaspora have utilized the power of the Internet. The Internet has provided the digital diaspora a platform for building various social networks that create a sense of identity and solidarity from shared traditional Chinese cultural values which are then used to mobilize overseas Chinese to actively participate in a form of global Chinese politics. This paper argues that the transnational activities of the Chinese digital diaspora has simultaneously added to Beijing's international influence and standing while increasing the political clout of those critical of the communist government, both within and outside the country.*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era most host societies and their governments have become increasingly aware and supportive of diasporic affiliations with their homelands. Indeed, generally speaking, the host society no longer deems membership and participation in a diaspora to be a major obstacle for group integration, affluence, and influence, especially for ethnic minorities in Western democratic societies (Sheffer 2003, 4). The continuing trends of international migration, the global spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and economic globalization have combined to create good conditions for growth in the number, scope and scale of transnational diasporic activities. The Internet in particular has become a major force in transforming diasporic identities and facilitating transnational activities. The subsequent creation of “digital diasporas” – diasporas informed and mobilized by the Internet – has fostered democratic values, eased security concerns in both the homeland and the host society, improved diaspora members’ quality of life in the host society, and contributed to socioeconomic developments in the homeland (Brinkerhoff 2009).

One of the most prominent changes in the post-Cold War world has been the increasing importance of China to economic and strategic outcomes at the global, regional and national levels. China’s successful modernization has moved it from being a marginal participant in the Western-dominated international system to a focal point in Asia-Pacific region’s globalization processes. As a result of China’s ascension in global and regional hierarchies, ethnic Chinese have become a central topic and important part of global migration flows. The Chinese diaspora here is defined according to Gabriel Sheffer’s definition of diasporas as state-linked – in this case those Chinese migrants who reside and act outside of China but maintain strong sentimental and material links to their homeland (Sheffer 2003, 73). The Chinese diaspora is a popular topic in the disciplines of history, sociology, and economics. This literature tends to valorise Chinese emigrants’ integration into their host countries as well as their connections with China but neglects to pay attention to the development of the Chinese diaspora in the virtual world. By

focusing on the Chinese digital diaspora in North America, this paper attempts to analyze the state of the Chinese digital diaspora and the subsequent transformations in identity in the global information age.

A TRANSFORMED IDENTITY: FROM SOJOURNING COOLIES TO DIGITAL DIASPORA

The Chinese have been involved in international migration and sojourning for centuries, but large-scale emigration became part of China's modern history in the nineteenth century. The trickle of Chinese emigration grew into a continuous stream until the Communist Party took power in mainland China. Before 1949, most Chinese emigrants were peasants from southern coastal provinces such as Guangdong and Fujian who went to Southeast Asian countries for employment as coolies, traders, and farmers. From the 1950s until the early 1990s, overt discrimination, hostility, and intermittent violence in the region forced many overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia to leave their host countries and caused a shift in the emigrant destinations of choice of mainland Chinese from Southeast Asia to North America, Europe, Japan and the Oceania. As a result the total resident population of overseas Chinese in the United States and Canada increased from 295,500 in 1963 to 1.65 million in 1985 (Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission 1997).

China's reform and opening up at the end of the 1970s has translated into a steady 1.8 percent annual growth in the overseas Chinese population since 1979. By the end of 2005, the total population of overseas Chinese reached 38.4 million (defined as Chinese outside the mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau), with growing numbers in North America. Ethnic Chinese comprise the largest minority group in Canada. And according to the US Census Bureau's 2004 American Community Survey, Chinese-Americans constitute the largest portion of the Asian American population, which included 3.5 million people. Among the US foreign-born population, the second highest country of birth was China, with an estimated population of 1.9 million Chinese-born in the US alone by 2004 (American Community Survey 2004).

In the last two decades, new Chinese immigrants arriving from mainland China began to dominate the overseas Chinese population. From 1989 to 1998, the portion of mainland Chinese immigrants who gained US permanent residence status increased from 58.5 percent to 74.5 percent among the total population of Chinese immigrants (Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission 2001). The rise in the number of naturalized mainland Chinese continued into the twenty-first century. In 2008 alone, more than 80,000 Chinese immigrants received legal permanent residency status in the US, accounting for 7 percent of the total number of "green cards" issued in 2008 – a number second only to Mexican nationals.

The more traditional Chinese identities retained by earlier generations of overseas Chinese have changed with the addition of these new immigrants arriving from contemporary China. The second- and third-generation Chinese Americans have also contributed to the substantial transformations in the structure and definition of cultural and economic identities in the Chinese diaspora in North America. The early Chinese diasporans tended to concentrate in tightly-bound ethnic ghettos, creating Chinatowns within big cities such as New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Boston and Philadelphia where they tended to live and work, choosing not

to move into wealthier and/or more diverse residential areas (Fan 2003). Today, many new Chinese immigrants and second- and third-generation Chinese settle in alternative spaces, such as the suburbs and rural areas in non-coastal regions.

The dramatic change in settlement patterns can be attributed to the rise in the education levels of the North American Chinese diaspora. In Canada, compared with a national average of 18 percent, more than 30 percent of the Chinese ancestry population have completed bachelor's degrees (Pon 2005). About 80 percent of the US and Canada's China-born populations are high school graduates and more than a third of contemporary Chinese immigrants have attained a college education or advanced professional training. While the older-generations in the Chinese diaspora had limited English-language abilities and professional training, many of the new Chinese immigrants and second- and third-generation Chinese diasporans speak English and face fewer barriers in the job market. People of Chinese ancestry in North America are now twice as likely as their Caucasian counterparts to be employed in white-collar work, including professional, managerial, and technical positions. At 52 percent, the Chinese-born U.S. residents had the second highest percentage of civilian-employees working in management, professional and related occupations in 2008 (Terrazas and Batalova 2010).

THE CHINESE DIGITAL DIASPORA

As might be expected, higher education levels and employment status has given the new generation of Chinese diaspora greater access to the Internet. The net result has been the creation of the Chinese digital diaspora - Chinese emigrants who utilize the Internet to organize their diasporic communities and to maintain strong sentimental and material links with China. Digital diasporas are defined as the international immigrants living outside their ethnic homelands who comprehensively utilize ICTs (Brinkerhoff 2009). Sizeable numbers of Chinese emigrants have become Internet users in the last decade, increasing the scope and scale of communication among Chinese diasporic communities and with Internet users in China. This growth in the digital diaspora has precedents in other globalization-related developments. In the last two decades increasingly convenient air transportation and the flourishing of the international tourism industry has allowed for more frequent cultural exchanges between immigrant host countries and China. The embrace of multiculturalism also provided the Chinese diaspora with the cultural resources, intellectual curiosity, and policy environment to create a meaningful Chinese life in *expatria* that further facilitated connections with China.

Greater access to the Internet, however, has led to new varieties of transnational activism. While there has been relatively little research done on the overall Chinese diaspora's online activities, there are some studies of Asian American online communities. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Spooner 2001), Asian Americans have been found to be predominantly veteran users who typically use the Internet more often and for a longer duration than all other ethnic groups. In addition, statistically Asian American Internet users were better educated and wealthier than other ethnic and racial user groups. Another study on internet usage among U.S. ethnic groups (Leggatt 2007) concurred with the Pew project's conclusions, finding that the two national groups which spend the most hours online are from India and China and that nearly 90 percent of Asian Americans are Internet

users. This indicates that Asian Americans more likely to log onto the Internet on a regular basis, perhaps making online activities part of their daily routine.

MOBILIZED CHINESE DIGITAL DIASPORA EMBRACE THE GLOBALIZATION OF CHINESE POLITICS

The accelerated pace of international migration, the information revolution, and the continuous democratization of the state in the global south have propelled a globalization of domestic politics that is similar to the globalization of national economies (Koslowski 2005). Digital diasporas have become important actors in the changing nature of “domestic” politics through the creation and maintenance of various epistemic, social, cultural, economic, and political narratives. Some cyber-ethnic communities act in the interest of diasporas, promoting their cultural autonomy, political advancement, economic success, and social mobility in host countries. As Saskia Sassen (2000, 198) wrote, “Digital space, whether public or private, is partly embedded in actual societal structures and power dynamics. Its topography weaves in and out of non-electronic space.” Utilizing virtual territory, digital diasporas exercise influence on real-world politics, including relationships with other ethnic groups in their adopted countries, as well as on foreign policy, particularly on the relations between their adopted countries and ethnic homelands. According to Aihwa Ong, ICTs have greatly empowered digital diasporas:

Digital technologies thus endow elite expatriate subjects with a new kind of power that goes beyond providing the funds, information, and arms of traditional long-distance nationalism. By organizing web pages, member lists, and chat rooms, expatriate elites get to define the experience of co-ethnics anywhere in the world, to revive or shape cultural memories and incite the vicarious sharing of rage and suffering, thus calling into being a cyberpublic of communal belonging (Ong 2006: 71).

The Chinese diaspora is diverse but many diasporans have faced the issue of identity transforming as a result of transnational activities that engage homeland. The Chinese digital diaspora and online Chinese diasporic communities have engaged with the idea of Chinese-ness in ways that have impacted non-virtual spheres. Loong Wong (2003) argues that virtual space has done much to erase the very real differences within the Chinese diasporas by promoting myths of unity as well as forcing conformity on Internet users in Chinese cyberspace. According to Wong, online interactions tend to create a herd mentality which forces those wishing to remain in the group to deny parts of their “Chinese selves” that do not conform to the common denominators of the larger Chinese community. Considering that the online Chinese cultural sphere is composed of transnational online spaces both inside and outside China, Guobin Yang (2002) believes that the online dynamics reflect offline conflicts and struggles present in the real world. As such, online spaces may fulfill significant political functions at both the national and international levels (Yang 2002). For example, the Chinese diasporic digerati – like other diasporas – is connected to other communities in cyberspace. In contrast with the predictions made in the early days of the Internet, communities often come together on the Internet such that overseas Chinese are now more connected to other groups and valued, rather than stigmatized, in their adopted countries.

Diasporic organizations also function on various political planes including the domestic level in the host countries and the homeland, as well as on regional and international levels

(Sheffer 2003, 173). The formation and strengthening of online communities has served to spread Chinese culture and traditions around the world. As a low-intensity transmitter of cultural values and even language to external communities, the Internet has enabled economic globalization by uniting commercial and social networks. Through the provision of a forum for social networks, the digital Chinese diaspora has created a sense of identity and solidarity around some shared traditional Chinese cultural values, helping to preserve Chinese national identity among the more than 38 million overseas Chinese.

Cyberspace not only allows the Chinese digital diaspora to transcend cultural isolation and social displacement, but is also a tool for political mobilization. Prior to the Internet, numerous provincial, town and professional associations as well as Chinese churches, language and culture schools existed but the Internet has acted as a powerful platform linking overseas Chinese together into a single (though disjointed) community. As members of a broadly defined overseas Chinese community, the Chinese digital diaspora contributes loudly to the overseas Chinese nationalist discourse. The Internet contributes to the construction of a global Chinese identity with shared values, while simultaneously raising the level of cultural Chinese-ness abroad. This has created new forms of transnational modernity and citizenship called Netizens. As China strengthens its global status through economic power (including foreign investment, international commerce, and an increasingly skilled labor force), and exerts greater transnational cultural influence through productive and creative diplomacy in fields such as sports, films, and music, Chinese-ness seems ever more attractive. As this situation progresses, it is reasonable to expect that more overseas Chinese will re-embrace their identities and seek to build tighter bonds with their ethnic homeland. Overseas Chinese are now coming together as never before in cyberspace to better the Chinese nation although there is still major disagreement on how to do so. The Chinese digital diaspora tends to promote the concept of the “big family,” doggedly defending community interests and plastering over regional, political, and social differences when conceptualizing China, particularly when communicating with the non-Chinese world (Qiu 2003).

With the sizeable overseas Chinese population going online, the frequency and scale of communication within and among the Chinese diaspora and between overseas Chinese and people residing in China has greatly increased. The emergence of the Chinese digital diaspora with its transnational communications has significantly altered the connection between China and the overseas Chinese communities. The increasingly important role of the Chinese digital diaspora is not altogether welcomed by the communist government in Beijing since overseas Chinese are not bound by the censorship that characterizes China’s domestic Internet activities. The Chinese digital diaspora typically is freer to express their views in the cyberworld than Internet users residing in China itself (Kalathil and Boas 2003). In overseas Chinese virtual communities, Chinese politics and reform is the hottest topic. Discussions range from how to foster ideological and nationalist unity, to the promotion of human rights and the ongoing environmental degradation. While some transnational activities may help Beijing further its foreign policy goals, the diaspora can also be more critical of the communist government. For example, Beijing’s less assertive foreign policies over some international issues have been comprehensively criticized by many members of the Chinese digital diaspora (Ding 2007). Furthermore, the Internet enables Netizens to organize transnational political activities in unprecedented ways. The online activities of some overseas Chinese political organizations such

as the Falun Gong and other political dissident groups can pose direct and acute challenges to the Chinese communist government's domestic legitimacy as well as its international image.

CONCLUSIONS

The Chinese digital diaspora has significantly transformed the traditional links and communication channels between overseas Chinese and their homeland brethren, not only on the Internet but in the real world as well. In the global information age and with the rise of transnational public spheres, the Chinese digital diaspora has redefined Chinese identity by expanding the principles of association, facilitating transnational communications and actively participating in various forms of online transnational activism, which has shaped the structure and purposes of existing social networks in their adopted countries. For the communist government in Beijing, the Chinese digital diaspora has become a double-edged sword. On the one hand, some online diasporic activities have benefited the government by adding to China's international influence. The Internet has also acted a venue for connecting the overseas Chinese community with the homeland in new channels that can promote a favourable national image. On the other hand, the Chinese government fears that ICTs and diasporic activism manifest socio-political phenomena such as online nationalism and free information flows that may dramatically increase the political clout of their critics. Beijing, as an authoritarian government that has a policy of information control, certainly faces challenges in balancing the pros and cons of the digital diaspora, even as China joins the globalization and information revolution. While Beijing finds it difficult to utilize Chinese digital diaspora as an obedient "propaganda column" in the global information age, regardless those Chinese diasporic digerati have begun to play a more active role in the globalization of Chinese politics and Chinese-ness.

REFERENCES

- American Community—Asians: 2004*. (2007). February. Available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2007pubs/acs-05.pdf>.
- Brinkerhoff, Jennifer M. (2009). *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement*. New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Ding, Sheng. (2007). “Digital Diaspora and National Image Building: A New Perspective on Chinese Diaspora Study in the Age of China’s Rise.” *Pacific Affairs*, 80 (4): 627-648.
- Fan, Cindy C. (2003). “Chinese Americans: Immigration, Settlement, and Social Geography,” in L. J. C. Ma and C. Cartier (ed.) *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Kalathil, Shanthi & Taylor C. Boas. (2003). *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Koslowski, Rey. (2005). “International Migration and the Globalization of Domestic Politics: A Conceptual Framework,” in Rey Koslowski (ed.) *International Migration and the Globalization of Domestic Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Leggatt, Helen. (2007). “90 percent of Asian Americans go online,” BizReport, May 10, 2007. Available at http://www.bizreport.com/2007/05/90_percent_of_asian_americans_go_online.html#
- Ong, Aihwa. (2006). *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission (Taiwan). (1997). *Overseas Chinese Economy Yearbook*.
- Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission (Taiwan) (2001). *The Evolution of Structure of American Chinese and its Impacts* (Meiguo Huaren Jiegou Bianqian yu Yingxiang).
- Pon, Gordon. (2005). “Antiracism in the Cosmopolis: Race, Class, and Gender in the Lives of Elite Chinese Canadian Women.” *Social Justice*, 32 (4): 161-179.
- Qiu, Hong. (2003). “Communication among Knowledge Diasporas: Online Magazines of Expatriate Chinese Students”, in Karim H. Karim (ed.) *The Media of Diaspora*. London: Routledge.
- Sassen, Saskia. (2000). “The Impact of the Internet on Sovereignty: Unfounded and Real Worries”, in *Understanding the Impact of Global Networks on Social, Political and Cultural Values* Christoph Engel and Kenneth H. Keller, Eds. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.

Sheffer, Gabriel. (2003) *Diaspora Politics: At Home Aboard*. New York, Cambridge University Press.

Spooner, Tom. (2001). *Asian-Americans and the Internet: The Young and the Connected*. Washington, DC: Pew Internet and American Life Project. Available at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2001/AsianAmericans-and-the-Internet.aspx>

Terraxas, Aaron and Jeanne Batalova. (2010). "Chinese Immigrants in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, May 2010. Available at <<http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=781> >

Wong, Loong. (2003). "Belonging and Diaspora: The Chinese and the Internet." *First Monday*, 8 (4). Available at <http://131.193.153.231/www/issues/issue8_4/wong/index.html>

Yang, Guobin. (2002). "The Internet and the Rise of a Transnational Chinese Cultural Sphere." *Media, Culture & Society*, 25 (4): 469-70.

