Diaspora online and postnational Chineseness

S. Wanning
Southern Cross University

Diaspora Online And Postnational Chineseness

This article outlines the issues and concerns in a case study of Chinese News Digest web site (www.cnd.org). The study represents the initial phase of a three-year project, which is concerned with the relationships between media, narration and post-national identities in the contexts of Chinese communities now living in Australia, Southeast Asia and North America. The case study examines the relationship between cyber technology and potentially new ways of imagining the nation. The article also outlines the author's paradigm shift as a migrant to show that one's intellectual journey is necessarily is related to one's personal journey, and the direction of one's intellectual work is (and should be) more often than not driven and navigated by the fear and desire, joy and anxiety of oursevles as individuals.

Sun Wanning

Southern Cross University, Australia

In his seminal work *Cultural China: the Periphery as the Centre*, Tu Weiming (1994) argues that Cultural China can be represented "in terms of a continuous interaction of three symbolic universes". The first, according to Tu, consists of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, societies populated predominantly by cultural and ethnic Chinese. The second consists of Chinese communities throughout the world, who recently have tended to define themselves as members of the Chinese "diaspora". Tu's third symbolic universe consists of individual international scholars, journalists and writers who write about China for the consumption of their own linguistic communities.

As years passed by, I have moved from the first "universe" to somewhere between the second and third 'universe'. I have metamorphosed from a sojourner to a resident in Australia, and from a native Chinese to *hua-chao* (Chinese living overseas). As my research into identity politics and representations has become more anchored in the Western academic institutions, my intellectual relationship to mainland China has become more and

more tenuous. China keeps changing, at a speed and in a way that I sometimes find bewildering and frustrating. It is only a recent realisation that the couture of my research development is a reflection of my personal experience as a migrant.

In other words, the shifts in the contexts, issues and focus of my research for the last decade -- from mainland Chinese media to diasporic Chinese media, from print media to computer mediated media (internet and computer games), from state propaganda strategies to the notion of nationalism as pleasurable commodity -- are a result of my changed media and ideoscapes. This is also reflected in *The Chinese Media in Diaspora: Redefinition of Identity and Community in the 1990s'*, a three-year project funded by Southern Cross University, which I started from the beginning of 1998.

In the 1990s, the rapid economic development of the People's Republic of China, the increased number of Chinese migrants to Australia, North America and Southeast Asia countries, and the growing economic integration of Taiwan, Hong Kong and the PRC have combined to raise new questions about the potential role of the ethnic Chinese in these countries. Ethnic Chinese have already ensured that they will play an increasingly dominant role in the regional economy alongside the People's Republic of China in the next century. Together they are being talked of as the world's fourth economic power-house after North America, Europe and Japan -- a 'Chinese Commonwealth'.

Overseas Chinese build on their 'Chineseness' both individually and through community activities which reinforce their importance of family, networks and language. Chinese language media, including both the global Chinese media networks based in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the more recently emerged and localised Chinese language media outlets in various regions of the world, plays a significant part in this process. Furthermore, the role of internet is becoming increasingly crucial in the formation of diasporic Chinese identities. My project is an attempt to study comparatively the relationships between media, narration and postnational identities in the contexts of Chinese communities now living in Australia, Southeast Asia and North America.

In his *Patriotism and Its Futures*, Appadurai (1996) points to the need to study what he refers to as the "postnational formations", due to the increasing number of mobile populations of refugees, tourists, guest workers, transnational intellectuals, scientists, and illegal aliens - diasporic people who are unrestrained by ideas of spatial boundary and territorial sovereignty. As a result of the movements of these people there is a growing tendency for bounded territories to give way to disaporic networks, nations to

transnations. Due to these shifts, according to Appadurai, patriotism has become not only increasingly "plural, serial, contextual and mobile", but more importantly, "susceptible to transformation, in theory and in practice" (1996: 176).

In my project, I want to take the national/territorial versus postnational/mobile nexus a step further and argue that in the deployment of territorial nationalism, postnational discourses not only inherit traditional notions of place, they are also trapped in a nation-state's memory of the past. The relationship between history and nation is a complex one, particularly at the end of the century, in an era of an increasingly globalised, post-nation state. Suppressed memories do not simply disappear; they are sometimes mobilised elsewhere in the attempt to build the new community.

According to Duara (1995), communities are formed not through the invention of new cultural forms or tradition, but through the hardening of boundary -- the privileging of a particular cultural practice as the constitutive principle of the community -- be it common history, race or language. It is this complex relationship between history, territory and postnational imaginary that is the focus of my research.

In the initial stage of research, I want to pursue a case study -- that of a web site in CND (*www.cnd.org:8023/njmassacre/index.html*) -- a news distribution organisation in the computer network. Founded by a group of Chinese students and scholars in the United States and Canada in 1991, CND readers can be found in all of the world's continents, in more than 50 countries and regions including Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The web site focuses on the Nanjing Massacre, a historical event during the Sino-Japanese War during which about 300,000 Chinese were slaughtered.

Admittedly the history of modern China has been a history of fighting with various 'others', from the British during the Opium War, the KMT (nationalists) during the Civil War, to the Americans during the Korean War. However, it is Japan that has served as the archetype of otherness for the Chinese nation. This is because the Japanese invasions and their atrocities during the WW 2 have left a permanent scar on the Chinese collective psyche and this is made worse by Japan's constant attempts to gloss over that period of history. In addition, unlike the UK or the USA, the image of Japan as a historical enemy has an appeal to an entire array of Chinese communities, including those in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and Oceania countries.

Furthermore, more than half a century later, Japan is in a stronger position to exercise its dominance over China in economic terms than Western nations, and, for this reason, the Chinese

government has deliberately shied away from exposing the truths of the event. By taking on the analysis of the materials provided in the web site, I seek to examine the means by which these sites resort to the most repressed collective memories in the 20th century Chinese history. In my project, these sites will be used to point to the potency of cultural memories associated with shame, trauma and humiliation as an active agent for the softening and hardening of self/Other boundary. These sites provide a virtual space which is nevertheless fraught with ambiguity and tension -- fact vs fiction, truth vs narrative, virtual vs real, image vs reality, self vs Other.

Is it possible that, painful as they are to recall, a trip down such a virtual memory lane compensates the estranged visitor -- both in the geographic and cultural senses -- with a kind of pleasure of belonging, of having one's Chineseness affirmed through an act of articulation or participation? Searching for answers, I am concerned with the formation of a diasporic Chinese identity, with a special focus on how the 'national Other' is constructed, and how history, as a source of otherness, is constantly tapped to construct an identity of dispersal and displacement, and how new technologies enable these new subjectivities to articulate a desire and pleasure of belonging.

A central question surrounding this issue is the relationship between cyber technology and potentially new ways of imagining the nation. Much has been written about how electronic media have transformed our understanding of temporality, spatiality and a sense of who we are as individuals (Turkle, 1985, 1996). Critical studies point to the materiality behind the virtual reality: gendered technology (Haraway 1991), as racialised space. However, not much thought - with the exception of Mitra's (1996, 1997) work - has been given to whether or how the new spatiality and temporality of the new electronic media transform our ways of imagining our collective identity. Are there new forms and strategies of narrating the nation, which are inspired and enabled by the new technologies, or are new technologies simply reproducing the existing ones?

By way of looking at the Nanjing Massacre sites, I will examine the enactments and mobilisations of certain cultural memory about China's past in these pages. I want to point to some discursive attempts to negotiate a different form of Chinese national imaginary. More specifically I seek to unravel a few moments of 'softening' and 'hardening' of boundary in the 'othering process' in the postnational formations. By doing so, I hope to provide some preliminary answers to the question of the relationship between history, cultural memory and new technologies.

The theoretical point of departure for this analysis is that if

what distinguishes a 'national self' from 'national others' emerges in the collectively held images made possible with 'print capitalism' and 'electronic capitalism' throughout the 20th century, then as we enter the next millennium, new electronic media and computer mediated communication (CMC) -- including internet and computer games -- as means of assisting various postnational imagining warrants vigorous examination.

With migration on a global scale the advent CMC technologies has allowed a growing sense of displacement, to be manifested in a mobile, portable 'memory bank' consisting of past national events and happenings. So the relationship between cultural memory and new technology becomes crucial: to what extent does this global cultural form -- technical, timeless and placeless -- enable or inhibit the articulations of postnational "nomadic subjectivities"? If nations are imagined through narration and, as Anderson (1983) points out so succinctly and eloquently, communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity and genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined, then what do these sites say about internet as a tool for certain communities' national imagining?

Analysing Marguerite Duras's work and sites such as those deicated to the rememberance of the Jewish Holocaust, Juchau (1997: 70) points to the importance of a history which "acknowledges its fragmented construction, which points to its gaps and absences and its silences in representing the past". Such a history, argues Juchau, is necessarily awkward -- showing 'seams and lacunae that fracture many historical representations' -- and non-cathartic, since it needs to "testify to its own limits of expression". Juchau's account of the issues in the historical remembering of the Holocaust points to the complex and important relationship between history, memory and narrative.

Her argument suggests that narrative of the past events is driven, not so much by truth, as by desire, and is concerned not so much by the past but, by the present. Quoting John Frow's definition that memory "rather than being the repetition of the physical traces of the past, is a construction of it under conditions and constraints determined by the present", Juchau says that the many Holocaust memorials function to represent the past, keep it in the present while also constructing and creating identities of both the dead and the living.

Those who have spent some time browsing through the internet know that items in this menu merely provide a list of starting points, whereby visitors can, with a click of the mouse, infinitely connect to a plethora of other related sites. The route of each visit could be different and unpredictable and the only navigatory principle is premised on whims and desire.

Nevertheless, there is a certainty about these sites: no matter how long one lingers and how widely and random one roams, one is more likely to return emotionally stirred -- feeling angry, humiliated or sad.

In my analyses of these web pages, I by no means want to suggest that the Massacre did not happen, and that these photos were simulacra; rather I want to point to many important questions which seem to be elided such as the materiality of the site's maintainers and visitors, their prejudices and politics. Most of the people who maintain and visit these sites tend to be university-educated, bilingual, high-achieving male Chinese ex-patriots. How are their cultural positions negotiated in these narratives of history?

In spite of attempts to construct some kind of totalising version of the historical event by making available on the net an array of "classified materials", photographic evidence, and "first-hand statistics and fact", questions remain unanswered as to who took these shocking and "gruesome" pictures, where these facts and figures come from, and what the stories are behind these female bodies raped and killed by the Japanese perpetrators, whose images are recruited to contribute to a particular kind of nationalist narrative.

My reading of these web pages suggests that there is an incongruence between a continuous use of familiar narrative style and an absence of the ritual of collective participation which sustain a traditional pathos. For instance, people who grew up in mainland China in the 1960s and 1970s -- and many of these page visitors are -- when 'class struggle' was the privileged political discourse should remember the ritualised act of 'speaking bitterness' *(su ku)*. These are occasions whereby model workers or peasants spoke to organised crowds about how hard life was under the oppression of KMT and feudal landlords before the CCP liberated China. These mass rituals were conducted in a spirit of "lest we forget". The speaker usually showed the audience some material objects as evidence of hardships and oppressions, and his/her talk was regularly and ritualistically interrupted with emotional, tear-streaming audience shouting "the past bitterness is never to be forgotten".

Although the "speaking bitterness" ritual stopped with the disappearance of the discourse of 'class struggle', its rhetorical techniques of achieving emotional engagement and maximising audience participation seem to be still at work in these sites of the Nanjing Massacre. This is mostly seen in the style and content of the accounts of the Massacre by individual survivors and witnesses of the event which, once publicised, acquired a collective significance.

The combination of close-up visual presentations of the

traumatised bodies in virtual photo archives and emotionally charged personal accounts detailing atrocities may, I suggest culminate in a surge of anti-Japanese feelings for web site visitors, who, in the absence of the ritualised collective catharsis, can then resort to entering their name in the guest book of the web site or 'posting' their responses in the message board as a way of voicing their moral support.

In other words, cultural signs are still deployed, however, once disabled by a change of signifying context, they function in a highly dispersed manner, signifying a form of Chineseness marked by a displaced and split identity. And it is partly through the embodiments of cyber-technology that this displaced identity is maintained. Could it be that, like many other forms of cyber-identity, the Chinese diasporic site visitors are postmodern cyborgs who repetitively return to the bluish grey computer screen to savour the comfort of belonging to a virtual Chinese community?

Furthermore, these sites also highlight a contradiction between a tendency towards an increasingly displaced and fractured postnational identity and an essentialist discourse of national Self and Other. In other words, because of the de-territorialised nature, cyber technology makes such contradiction not only possible but also normal. Many examples from these web pages (which are omitted here for lack of space) show that the constant traversing between the inclusion and exclusion, the familiar and the strange, here and there, us and them results in a somewhat schizophrenic way of being -- the unbearable lightness of being in-between.

These examples seem to testify to an important point Appadurai makes about the formations of post/national imaginary ie, although postnational movements challenge the monopoly of the nation-state as guardians of national identities, they are nevertheless trapped in the linguistic imaginary of the territorial state due to a lack of a separate repertoire of images, idioms and symbols. For Appadurai, this seems to constitute the contradictory nature of diasporic subjectivity: "Displacement and exile, migration and terror create powerful attachments to ideas of homeland that seem more deeply territorial than ever. But it is possible to detect in many of these transnations the elements of a postnational imaginary" (1996: 177).

In the case of the Chinese scholars now living in North America, Australia, and other Western countries, in order to remain Chinese, one has to keep telling stories of being Chinese. Collective memories of China's are kept alive by these self-exiled Chinese not only by the constant retelling of familiar national stories, but also by the repetitive deployment of familiar forms and strategies of story-telling. Cyberspace in this sense becomes

a vitally significant space for the telling of national stories. In the same way that remembering the past is more motivated by the politics of the present, condemnation of the historical Other says more about the fear and desire of the self than about the Other. For those Chinese *'hai wai you zi'* (Chinese descendants wandering overseas), Internet and WWW technology will continue to activate Chinese memory, a history of 'remembered grievances and cultivated glories'.

What seems to be uncanny is the fact that in spite of, or because of, the tension between new technology, which is memoryless and de-territorialised, and identity, which is bound by a specific notion of time and place, internet and its attendant cyberspace prove to be hugely enabling in articulating a strategically 'pure' collective identity. Mitra's (1996, 1997) studies of the Indian diasporic web sites also seems to testify to this point. Here we see an interesting reversal of the argument concerning identity and internet. While, as Turkle (1995) argues role playing in MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons/Dimensions) allows individuals to take on an identity which is more different, multiple, heterogeneous and fragmented than in real life, on a collective level internet may be used by translocal members of a particular community to negotiate an essentialist identity position as a way of coming to terms with an identity which, in real life, is marked by difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity and fragmentation.

These contradictions, tensions and ambiguities raise further questions: While internet technology is enabling in overcoming traditional notions of time and place, does it compensate or simply highlight the limitation and inadequacy of the existing discursive resources in identity politics? This is also related to the question surrounding postnational movements as we are heading for the next century: will a "disaporic public sphere" be truly possible and what voice -- discursive forms and strategies -- may best serves the interests of the postnational identities? Will internet and computer-mediated technology merely 'amplify' that voice, or will it be expected to substitute for, or produce that voice per se?

Writing about migrancy and experience, Madan Sarup (1996: 98) observes that for migrants identity is about becoming, not 'being', and expressing nostalgia and loss is part of that becoming. This process of becoming, according to Trinh Min-ha (1996: 14), is a process of ongoing articulation. This constant articulation of what one has become or what one is becoming in the postnational contexts, constitutes an important part of what Bhabha refers to as the "narration of the nation". This process of narrating the nation is participated by myriad individuals who have a story (or stories) to tell about themselves in postnational formations.

Modes of story-telling vary, depending on the genres or academic disciplines one identifies with. As a member of Chinese Diaspora who identifies with China but, nevertheless, has multiple allegiances, or split identities, I continue to be fascinated by these questions. Perhaps my academic research within these parameters is my way -- however unconscious -- of narrating my changing Chineseness. It is my belief that one's intellectual journey is necessarily related to one's personal journey, and the direction of one's intellectual work is (and should be) more often than not driven and navigated by the fear and desire of ourselves as individuals. ∎

REFERENCES:

Anderson, B. (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.

Appadurai, A. (1996),'*Patriotism and Its Futures'*, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, University of Minnesota Press.

Duara, P. (1995), *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, The University of Chicago Press.

Haraway, D., Simians (1991) *Cyborgs, Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991.

Juchau, M. (1996)"Forgetful memory: the Holocaust, history and representation", *The UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1996.

Madan Sarup (1994), "Home and identity" pp. 93-104, in *Travellers' Tales: Narratives of home and displacement*, by George Robertson, Melinda Mash, Lias Tickner, Jon Bird, Barry Curtis and Tim Putnam, eds, Routledge, London and NY.

Mitra, A. (1997) "Disaporic Websites: ingroup and outgroup discourse", *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1997.

_____ "Nations and the Internet: the case of a national newsgroup, 'soc.cult.indian' " *Convergence: Journal of Research in New Technologies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1996.

Nanjing Massacre: www.cnd.org:8023/njmassacre/index.html.

Trinh Min-ha (1994), "Other than myself/my other self" pp 9-26, in *Travellers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, George Robertson, Melinda Mash, Lias Tickner, Jon Bird, Barry Curtis and Tim Putnam eds, Routledge, London and NY.

Turkle, S. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of Internet*, London, 1995.

Tu Wei-ming (1994) (ed) *The Living Tree : The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif.

SUN WANNING, PhD teaches Communication at the Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia. Her doctoral thesis was on cross cultural reporting in Chinese and Australian newspapers. Email: wsun@scu.edu.au