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Journal of Chinese Overseas, Volume 2, Number 1, May 2006, pp. 1-32
(Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jco.2006.0001>



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*Virtual Communities and Chinese National Identity*¹

BRENDA CHAN

With the implementation of economic reforms in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the relaxation of restrictions on foreign travel, a new wave of overseas migration from mainland China has taken place. Compared to the earlier waves of Chinese emigrants who were semi-literate peasants and craftsmen, many new Chinese migrants are highly educated professionals and are extremely mobile. While the earlier Chinese migrants were mostly from southern provinces in China and organized their voluntary associations based on native-place or blood ties, new Chinese migrants hail from different regions in China, and would build social organizations of different configurations. Besides setting up voluntary organizations offline, these new Chinese migrants are also forming cybercommunities on the Internet. This article investigates whether virtual communities formed by new Chinese migrants also offer identity options to migrants in terms of ethnicity and national belonging, as offline immigrant associations do. It does so by examining the varieties of Chinese national identities articulated in cyberspace and in the offline activities of two virtual communities formed by new Chinese migrants who are working and studying in Singapore. I argue that virtual communities formed by migrants may or may not offer distinct identity options to their members in terms of ethnic or national belonging. Virtual communities with very diverse user profiles may offer more distinct identity options for their members as a strategy in attracting and retaining members, compared to virtual communities with a more homogeneous membership.

THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS IN WHICH MIGRANTS may maintain their cultural identities in the host societies. These can range from use of small media (letters, telephone, videotapes) and mass media (radio, satellite television, cinema), to the setting up of religious and cultural associations that allow "regrouping individuals of similar origins" (Dayan 1998: 108).

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In their analysis of immigrant associations in Britain, Rex and Josephides (1987) contend that immigrant associations are akin to Durkheim's "occupational groups" which play a crucial role in the integration of individuals with society (Durkheim 1952). Immigrant associations generally perform four major functions: providing fellowship, assisting migrants in solving personal or material problems, defending the group's interests in the host society and cultural maintenance (Rex 1973, as cited in Rex and Josephides 1987). For migrants who are torn from their original kinship networks, immigrant associations can exert a sort of moral influence over the individual, and help define his identity.

By affirming certain beliefs, values and meanings, immigrant associations may be said to offer "identity options" to the migrants in terms of ethnicity, religion, or even class (Rex and Josephides 1987). However, according to Rex and Josephides, the options on offer may contradict one another, and the migrants may or may not take up these identity options. The individual migrant may even face the dilemma of choosing identity options offered by the immigrant community and those offered by the out-group.

With the implementation of economic reforms in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the relaxation of restrictions on foreign travel (especially the 1985 law on emigration), a new wave of overseas migration from China has taken place and the pace of such migration accelerated in the 1990s. This new wave of migration from mainland China is occurring simultaneously with "an intense current of international migrations in which Asians — among them 'secondary' Chinese migrants from Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and Taiwan to America and Australia — had already started playing a leading role" (Nyíri 1999: 24). This has boosted the numbers in existing ethnic Chinese communities in countries such as the US, Canada, and Australia. The PRC citizens who have left China since 1978, including students, are referred to as *xin yimin* (new migrants)² in official PRC literature.

While this new wave of migration from the PRC may be seen as a contemporary extension of the long historical tradition of Chinese migration, it has been recognized that the new Chinese migrants are different from the earlier waves of Chinese emigrants in the past. Compared to the earlier migrants who were semi-literate peasants and craftsmen, many new Chinese migrants are highly educated professionals and are extremely mobile (*Lianhe Zaobao*, 30 July 2001). Therefore the patterns of social organization and social relationships formed by these new Chinese migrants will be different from the "old" Chinese migrants who departed China before World War II.

While the earlier Chinese migrants were from the southern provinces in China and organized their voluntary associations based on native-place or blood ties, the new Chinese migrants hail from different regions in China, and would build social organizations of different configurations. For instance, they could form associations

based on alumni relations from the same university, as pointed out by Professor Kee Pookong at a seminar on new Chinese migrants (*Lianhe Zaobao*, 30 July 2001). They could also form scholars' organizations and professional associations such as the Chinese American Association of Engineers, as mentioned in Chiu and Tan (2004). Besides setting up voluntary organizations offline, these new Chinese migrants are also forming cybercommunities on the Internet — the issue is how similar and different from immigrant associations these virtual communities are in meeting the social and cultural needs of the migrants. Do virtual communities also offer certain identity options to migrants in terms of ethnicity and national belonging,³ as immigrant associations do? If yes, how are Chinese ethnic and national identities articulated in cyberspace and in the offline activities of these virtual communities? These are some of the questions that I seek to address in this paper.

Cultural Identity and the Internet

Several studies have investigated ethnic and national identity on the Internet by way of analyzing the discourse of virtual communities formed by migrants (Liu 1999; Mitra 1997a; Wu 1999). Just as mass media at the various levels (international, national and ethnic/local) can exert dual influences of homogenization and diversification in society (Ito 1999), the imagination of a nation on the Internet is driven by two conflicting forces (Mitra 1997a).

On the one hand, there is a powerful force of fragmentation on the Internet, as demonstrated by the multifarious and ever-changing discourses produced online about the image of any particular nation:

The power and uniqueness of the dynamics of the electronic community lie precisely in the absence of restrictions and controls on anyone's voice.... Everyone has a "voice" in this space. This has far-reaching consequences, particularly in the way the space is utilized to produce national images. In other kinds of traditional public spaces, such as those created by broadcast media or film, the question of empowerment becomes much more diffuse than in the case of the Internet.... [I]t is more difficult to locate the dominant in the virtual space (Mitra 1997a: 73).

On the other hand, argues Mitra (1997a), there are *centralizing* tendencies through which migrants use the Internet to draw together fellow-migrants of the same place of origin, building a sense of solidarity and cohesion based on their common homeland and marginalized identities in the host societies. Studies of virtual communities formed by Chinese migrants tend to emphasize this centripetal tendency. Yang Guobin (2003) suggests the rise of a transnational Chinese cultural sphere on the Internet, which is made up of Chinese-language portal sites, newsgroups and online magazines, and bulletin board systems. These online spaces attract Chinese users from various parts of the world — mainly from the three

symbolic universes of “cultural China” (Tu 1994),⁴ generating discourses that circulate globally, and mobilizing transnational protests during critical events. Liu (1999) and Wu (1999), who focus on the new Chinese immigrants in North America, recount how virtual communities formed by Chinese migrants carry out online lobbying to fight for the protection of the Chinese community in the host country (against racial discrimination and social injustice). Liu (1999) argues that the Internet functions as “a mode of civic discourse” for them. He terms the extensive computer network of various Chinese virtual communities, together with the electronic publications and Internet services catering to these communities, as the “Chinese Ethnic Internet (CEI)” (Liu 1999:196). Liu explains:

Although it currently serves a community solidarity function, CEI was born out of a need for civic discourse among Chinese students and scholars in North America. The two earliest and most popular networks were established during the 1989 Democracy Movement in China.... The Chinese Ethnic Internet has also developed as an ideal channel for Chinese immigrants to unite themselves in order to protect the Chinese community in their host countries (1999: 198–99).

By privileging the centralizing tendencies of the Internet in facilitating transnational Chinese networks and fostering a sense of communion and belonging across dispersed Chinese communities, such studies inadvertently “reifies an essentialist Chinese identity” and glosses over the internal differences within diasporic Chinese communities (Wong 2003: 3). Yang Guobin betrays this bias, as he attributes the emergence of the transnational Chinese cultural sphere on the Internet to “a common cultural repertoire” (of shared history or expressive symbols) amongst Chinese netizens (Yang 2003: 486). In his analysis of cyber-communities formed by Chinese students in the US, Wu (1999) also argues that members’ identity in these communities tend to be stable and fixed by virtue of their common cultural characteristics based on Chinese culture.

However, Chinese identity on the Internet is not homogeneous but “contingent, often multiple and evolving” for “(d)iasporic Chinese ethnic communities can deploy a range of strategies to manage their identities” (Wong 2003: 3–4). Wong notes that websites targeted at Chinese communities in specific locales, such as <www.dimsum.org.uk> and <www.chinatownsdney.com>, tend to foster community-building within the host society rather than emphasize any political or emotional affiliation with China.

So far, in the study of Internet communities formed by Chinese migrants, there is inadequate treatment of the “faces behind the computer screens” and how online participation in virtual communities might connect with face-to-face interaction in the offline environment. Wu (1999) and Liu (1999) tend to focus too heavily on the Internet text, thus downplaying the dynamics of the community itself. For instance, we should consider whether Chinese national identities displayed by virtual communities are also projected in their offline activities.

Earlier studies of virtual communities typically view cyberspace as a separate and discrete realm from the offline world, and that this online space “could be investigated as an integral culture or social order in its own right” (Slater 2002: 541). Now researchers on virtual communities acknowledge that one of the important questions for further investigation concerns how online participation connects with offline life, and how online communities are linked with offline communities (Baym 1999; Wellman and Gulia 1999). Despite the co-existence of offline Chinese immigrant organizations and Internet communities formed by Chinese migrants, there is little effort in understanding the similarities and differences between them, especially in the ways these two types of organizations construct identities for Chinese diasporic communities.

This article seeks to address the lacunae identified in existing literature, by examining the construction of Chinese identities by virtual communities formed by Chinese migrants. The central research question is: At the organizational level, do virtual communities offer certain identity options to Chinese migrants in terms of ethnicity and national belonging? If the answer is yes, what are these identity options and how are they projected to the members of the virtual communities?

Chinese Immigrant Associations and the Construction of Chinese Identity

Studies of overseas Chinese communities often include the voluntary associations formed by the Chinese as an important social institution, particularly in shaping the identities of the overseas Chinese (see Li 1998; Li 1999; Ng 1999).

In his study of the Chinese and their community organizations in a Malayan town, Li Yi-Yuan (1970: 4–5) draws on three models postulated by Barbara Ward (1965) in understanding the construction of identity by traditional overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. The “immediate model” refers to the consciousness that a Chinese dialect group has regarding its own peculiar cultural characteristics. In the second model called the “internal observer model,” the community positions itself in relation to other dialect groups, discerning itself as different from other dialect groups, but this perspective of other dialect groups differs from the view of the outsider/researcher. The third is the “ideological model” in which every dialect group recognizes its belonging to a wider pan-Chinese cultural community, connected with the traditions and standards of the Confucian cultural elite class.

Li (1970) explains that there is greater conflict and divisions amongst the various dialect groups when there is little oppression or pressure from outside the Chinese community. When external conditions are unfavorable to the community, each dialect group will downplay their particular cultural characteristics and move

toward greater unity for the entire Chinese community, resulting in subordination of the immediate and internal observer models under the ideological model.

Of course, these three models as described by Li (1970) are not necessarily applicable in all overseas Chinese communities, as it depends on the relative variety of dialect groups in the community. In the case of Canada, Ng (1999) remarks that nearly all of the early Chinese immigrants hailed from the province of Guangdong and spoke Cantonese, so sub-ethnic divisions were centered around native-place origin and clan, while dialect-based sub-ethnic identities were far less important.

In his ethnographic study of community organizations formed by new Chinese migrants in Hungary, Nyíri (1999) has observed that new Chinese migrants project a pan-Chinese identity and are practicing a sort of deterritorialized nationalism through close alignment with the political authorities in China. This is unlike traditional overseas Chinese communities, which emphasized native-place or dialect group origins. The old overseas Chinese communities constructed their identities mainly in terms of the immediate and internal observer models, through native-place and surname associations which were predominantly tied to localities in pre-Communist southern China. On the other hand, the new Chinese migrants exhibit characteristics of the ideological model in the community organizations that they have formed:

The discourse of belonging of the new Chinese transnational community is based on a pan-Chinese identity, rather than on subethnic (Cantonese, Wenzhounese, etc.) identities typical of traditional, national or transnational overseas Chinese core communities. In both trade and the political spheres, the China they left but continue to deal with is a centralized China, represented by national organisations and commercial enterprises from all around the country.... The China concept of new migrants is centralised, based on the official nation-state ideology (Nyíri 1999: 68, 122).

To understand the pan-Chinese identity that the new Chinese migrants subscribe to, there needs to be an appreciation of the pan-Chinese identity that is promoted by the PRC state, which continues to wield a strong influence on the new migrants. Let us now consider the trajectories of Chinese national identity in the post-Mao era.

The reforms toward greater marketization of the economy as well as the declining hegemony of the Communist government saw the emergence of new forms of Chinese national identity (Harrison 1995). The relative prosperity of the coastal cities of China meant that there was an increasing emphasis on regional identity and people began to re-identify with native-place, particularly in the southern provinces (Friedman 1995). There were also increasing expressions of identity among some of the ethnic minorities challenging the dominance of the majority Han Chinese, leading to ethnic tensions in minority areas such as Xinjiang and Tibet (He and Guo 2000; Kim and Dittmer 1993).

After decades of isolation, the citizens of the PRC now have to come to terms with alternative versions of the Chinese nation outside of the mainland, as well as the alternative identities espoused by them. Four different Chinese nations co-exist in the world today : (1) the official Chinese nation under the state ideology, which comprises all PRC citizens, both Han and non-Han; (2) the PRC's Han nation, which is made up of the dominant Han population, and is set apart from the non-Han minorities and from the Chinese living outside the PRC; (3) the PRC plus the "compatriots" of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau; (4) Chinese who live in other parts of the world but continue to maintain a sense of political and cultural affinity to China (Townsend 1996: 28, cited in Chan 2005).

Just as there are different views of what constitutes the Chinese nation, Chinese national identity is also a contested notion. He and Guo (2000), cited in Chan (2005), posit four different constructs of Chinese national identity. In *statist and socialist identity*, Chinese national identity entails identification with, and loyalty to, the principles of socialism as well as the political and legal institutions of the communist Party-State. The second version of Chinese national identity is *Han identity*. For this perspective of Chinese national identity, the Han ethnic group is exalted as the essence of the Chinese nation, and "the Chinese" refers to people of Han ethnicity in the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau.

The third construct is Chinese *cultural identity* centered around Confucianism, in which people from various parts of the world who speak the Chinese language and share the Chinese culture are regarded as Chinese, even though they may not be of the same ethnicity and may profess different political beliefs. Chan (2005) notes that this model of Chinese identity is similar to the concept of Cultural China propounded by Tu Wei-ming (1994). In addition, there is the *civic and territorial* definition of Chinese national identity, in which "all people living in the territories of the PRC are seen as Chinese citizens, regardless of their ethnic, cultural and 'racial' background" (He and Guo 2000: 6).

According to He and Guo (2000), the PRC government basically promotes a pan-Chinese national identity, but manipulates different forms of it when targeting different political problems that the state confronts. The civic/territorial notion of national identity is useful in the face of separatist tendencies amongst some ethnic minorities, although the PRC state is reluctant in advocating a national identity based purely on citizenship. When dealing with Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, the PRC encourages a form of cultural genealogical identity based on common descent from the Yellow Emperor, in its efforts to reconcile the Chinese in these territories.

Context of Research and Methodology

To examine how migrants use the Internet to construct their national identities, this study investigates the development and activities of two online communities

formed by migrants from the PRC who are currently studying and working in Singapore. Many PRC migrants are attracted to Singapore because of the Chinese majority in its local population. Based on the last census in 2000, the Chinese form 76.8 percent of the resident population of about 3.3 million in Singapore, while proportions of Malays, Indians and other ethnic groups stand at 13.9 percent, 7.9 percent and 1.4 percent respectively (Singapore Department of Statistics 2002).

Chinese migration to Singapore had historically followed the trader, coolie and sojourner patterns (Wang 1991). Singapore is a tiny island nation at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. Originally a fishing village inhabited by the indigenous Malays, Singapore became a British trading post after Sir Stamford Raffles of the East India Company landed on the island in 1819. Singapore soon prospered as an entrepot port and attracted large numbers of immigrants from the region, including China and India. When Raffles landed in Singapore in 1819, there were already some Chinese living on the island, and in 1836, the Chinese numbered 13,700. By 1849, the Chinese had overtaken the indigenous Malays to form the majority of the population (53 percent), and Singapore became the first place outside China, Taiwan and Hong Kong where the Chinese were the majority (Chiew 1995:42).

From the 19th century to the early 20th century, the majority of Chinese immigrants in Singapore were peasants, craftsmen and petty traders from the southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, as well as Hainan Island (Chiew 2002; Freedman 1967). These early immigrants spoke dialects that were mutually unintelligible, such as Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka and others. Hence they would only mix with people of the same dialect group, and would form voluntary associations that were based on clan (surname), district and dialect group (Carstens 1976; Yen 1995).

The number of immigrants from China began to fall after the world recession of 1929–31 and almost ceased after the Communists took over the mainland in 1949. Singapore attained self-government from the British in 1959 and independence in 1965. The Chinese immigrants in Singapore became Singapore citizens and the closed-door policy in Communist China at that time meant that they had little hope of returning to their homeland. Thus began the localization and settling down of the Chinese population, with the proportion of local-born Chinese increasing dramatically from the 1930s onward, reaching 84.8 percent in 1990 (Chiew 1995).

The opening up of China's economy and the lure of its huge market have prompted Singapore to establish stronger trade and economic ties with the PRC in the 1990s. Under its policy of attracting foreign talent to the island republic, the Singapore government has several migration schemes for professionals, skilled labor⁵ and entrepreneurs. Many people have the perception that immigration

policies favor Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong and China (Lai 1995). Moreover, the Singapore government has been offering scholarships for outstanding PRC students to pursue their education in the local polytechnics and state-funded universities in Singapore. In exchange, these PRC students have to work in Singapore for three to six years upon graduation (*Lianhe Zaobao*, 1 Jan. 2006; *The Straits Times*, 3 Dec. 2005). If these PRC students manage to find jobs upon graduation, they are usually eligible to apply for permanent residence in the island republic. There is also an increasing number of “self-financing” PRC students in private schools, after the procedures in obtaining student visas were relaxed and simplified from November 2002 (*Lianhe Zaobao*, 11 Feb. 2003). There are some 33,000 students from mainland China studying in the public schools, private schools, polytechnics and universities in Singapore (*The Straits Times*, 3 Dec. 2005).

In 2000, five percent of the total resident population are born in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Singapore Department of Statistics 2002). It is difficult to ascertain how many of these Singapore residents are new migrants from PRC. Detailed migration data showing the source countries of immigrants is hard to come by in Singapore, but we can still venture a ballpark figure on the number of new Chinese migrants from PRC, based on the latest census data in 2000. Based on the last census in 2000, there are 163,503 Singapore residents (including both citizens and permanent residents) born in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, of whom 163,401 are of Chinese descent (Singapore Department of Statistics 2000a). There are 64,734 Chinese Singaporeans who are aged 75 years and above (Singapore Department of Statistics 2000b). We presume most of these elderly Chinese are first-generation Chinese immigrants who arrived in Singapore before the Communist takeover of mainland China. If we subtract the number of “old Chinese immigrants” from the resident population born in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, it means that the number of new Chinese migrants could be close to 100,000.

While Singapore has received Chinese migrants from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, this study will only focus on new migrants from PRC, and will include students, working professionals and those who have obtained permanent residence in Singapore. They will be referred to as “new Chinese migrants” in this paper, and the term will be used interchangeably with “PRC migrants.” The term “Chinese Singaporeans” here denotes Singapore citizens of Chinese descent, who either migrated to Singapore before World War II (that is, the “old Chinese migrants”), or were born in Singapore (“local-born Chinese”).

Two virtual communities formed by PRC migrants in Singapore were selected for case study: Springdale and AutumnLeaves.⁶ The purpose was to capture different segments within the community of new Chinese migrants in Singapore so that meaningful comparisons can be made. Springdale was established in early

2000 by PRC students in the National University of Singapore (NUS). While the majority of its members are PRC students studying in two state-funded universities in Singapore, there are also a number of users who have obtained permanent residence and are working in Singapore. AutumnLeaves was established in June 2001 by a PRC student called David, who was then studying for his Bachelor's degree in a private educational institution in Singapore. Users of AutumnLeaves are mainly PRC students from commercial schools and polytechnics in Singapore. Based on estimates by the founder and webmaster, about 10 percent to 15 percent of the Singapore-based users are permanent residents and employment pass holders.

Both Springdale and AutumnLeaves are websites providing PRC migrants with information on studying and working in Singapore. Each website hosts a bulletin board (BBS) that is further divided into sub-forums on various themes and topics, as I will elaborate in the next section. Besides looking at the online content on the Springdale and AutumnLeaves websites, I conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with members of the virtual communities, especially the key actors. I also carried out participant observation during offline interaction and activities of the two communities. This allows me to obtain a more holistic perspective of the dimensions and properties of the virtual communities being studied.

Data from the two virtual communities was gathered over a period of eight months from mid-February to end-October in the year 2003. For each virtual community, I first sought permission from the person-in-charge of the website to do research on the community, and then interviewed him to gather detailed information on how the website was started, the day-to-day operations of the website and the membership profile of the virtual community. I asked him to recommend a few members of the virtual community whom I could contact for interviews. After this, I employed a "snowballing method" such that whenever I interviewed a member of the virtual community, I would ask the respondent to introduce other members whom he or she knew personally. Furthermore, participant observation during offline activities of the virtual communities opened up opportunities for meeting potential interviewees. As I mingled with the participants at these offline meetings, I invited some of them for interviews.

In the sampling of interviewees, I made every effort to achieve a mix of students and employed persons; of members who were involved in the management of the website or community (such as forum moderators) and the "ordinary members" who participated in the forums of Springdale and AutumnLeaves. Altogether I conducted in-depth interviews with six persons from Springdale (including the Chief Editor), and eight persons from AutumnLeaves (including the founder of the website).

In the following section, I provide a brief overview of the features of the two virtual communities in terms of membership, organizational structure, group purposes, website content and offline activities.

Characteristics of the Two Virtual Communities

Participants and Organizational Structure

At the time research was conducted in March 2003, Springdale had about 20,000 registered users and the first page of the website attracted an average of 2,800 page views per day. The majority of Springdale users are PRC students in the two state-funded universities in Singapore, National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). NUS students make up a larger proportion amongst the members. Users in Singapore also include PRC Chinese who have graduated from NUS and NTU and are now working in Singapore. About 10 percent of the website visitors are located in China — some of them are friends of the PRC students in Singapore universities while others are seeking information about studying or working in Singapore. Jiayuan, who was Chief Editor of Springdale from 2002 to 2003, revealed that among Springdale users there were some Malaysian students from NUS and NTU.

When the author commenced research on the AutumnLeaves website in May 2003, there were about 10,000 registered users. The webmaster, David, estimated that 60 percent of the users were based in Singapore and 30 percent were located in China. Website statistics recorded a smattering of visitors from various other countries such as the United States, Malaysia, Hong Kong and so on. According to the webmaster, the AutumnLeaves users in Singapore are mainly PRC students in secondary schools, junior colleges, commercial schools and polytechnics, with a small number of PRC students from NUS and NTU. Approximately 10 percent to 15 percent of the Singapore-based users are permanent residents or employment pass holders.

Although both communities target PRC students in Singapore, each of them caters to a different “market.” Apparently Springdale has a more restricted user base of NUS and NTU students, whereas AutumnLeaves is dominated by students in commercial schools and polytechnics. AutumnLeaves also attracts a significantly larger number of China-based users than Springdale. Next let us consider the hierarchical structure in these two communities.

Although Harasim (1993) has argued that virtual communities are more egalitarian than real-life communities, empirical studies have shown that there are different levels of social status, power and influence amongst participants in online communities, based on the length of time the participant has joined the community (Giese 2003) or the level of expertise in manipulating the computer program (Reid 1999).

We identify a distinct hierarchy amongst users in Springdale and AutumnLeaves, consisting of three levels: management, moderators and the ordinary users. Moderators are the gatekeepers of the various discussion forums in the BBS. Besides editing and censoring undesirable posts, they are required to actively post

messages in their respective forums to stimulate discussion, as well as to mediate in any conflicts that occur during the discussions. There is yet another level of participants who exercise greater control and influence over other participants, including the moderators. Commonly known as “administrators” in BBS terminology, they can appoint moderators for different forums in the BBS, or strip moderators of their status if the latter are found to be irresponsible in performing their duties. However, I would prefer to call the administrators by the term “management.” This is because the administrators in Springdale and AutumnLeaves work in a team to set the policies and directions of development for the entire website, not just the BBS that is hosted in the site.

Springdale, in particular, displays a more institutionalized structure and a clear division of labor. It is managed by the Springdale Management Committee (SMC), which is elected at an Annual General Meeting (AGM) held offline.⁷ The SMC consists of seven persons. Besides the Chief Editor and the Treasurer, each SMC member heads a team of people called a “department,” responsible for different functions of the website. The five departments in Springdale are Content, Technical Development, Marketing, Activities and the Secretariat. Members of the SMC and various functional departments, including the moderators, are essentially unpaid volunteers working for Springdale.

AutumnLeaves started with a looser structure than Springdale, with only a small management team, forum moderators and users. It was only in May and June 2003 that the AutumnLeaves management began to recruit volunteers to form its Technical, Editorial, Strategic Development, Marketing and Activities departments. Yang Qiang, who was in charge of marketing and promoting the AutumnLeaves website, explained that it was because the increased number of users called for a more organized management structure.

For both websites, the bulk of the operating costs goes to the purchase and maintenance of the server. In terms of sources of revenue or funding to defray the operating costs of the website, Springdale relies mainly on advertising revenues from air ticketing agents and insurance agents in Singapore as well as sponsorship by the owner of one of the campus supermarkets in NUS. As for AutumnLeaves, it was initially supported through the personal funds of David, the founder and webmaster. The website did not carry any advertisement for commercial companies. The Marketing Department that was formed in June 2003 then became partly responsible for advertising sales, mainly targeted at the private/commercial schools in Singapore (as the website was an information portal for mainland Chinese who wanted to study in Singapore). Both Springdale and AutumnLeaves could decide on the content on their websites rather independently of the influence of the advertisers.

Group Purposes

Although the users of Springdale and AutumnLeaves are slightly different in profile, both virtual communities target new Chinese migrants in Singapore, and the purposes for interaction are very similar for both communities. The main objectives include the following:

1. Expression and sharing of emotions

Through posting poems and essays on the Creative Writing forums or chatting with other users, new Chinese migrants can share their thoughts and feelings with one another.

2. Exchange of information

Both Springdale and AutumnLeaves have thematic forums on studying, working and living in Singapore. PRC Chinese who are interested in migrating to, or studying in, Singapore can post questions, while those who are already in Singapore can provide relevant advice based on their knowledge and experiences.

3. Helping new migrants adapt to Singapore society

For instance, both websites have organized career seminars to prepare PRC students for their search for employment in Singapore upon graduation.

4. Providing friendship and mutual support

During interviews with users of Springdale and AutumnLeaves, a few respondents revealed that they found it difficult to achieve meaningful and intimate interaction with Singaporeans because the latter were more comfortable speaking in English. Providing friendship and social support for one another is particularly important for PRC students, most of whom come to Singapore alone, leaving behind the support networks they used to enjoy at home. “Springdale is a PRC community in this English-speaking land,” said Johnny, a Springdale member. “For PRC students like us, we don’t have support as our parents are not here. When we need to solve certain problems, when we have to express our opinions, when we are happy or sad and it’s hard to find someone to confide in, we go to Springdale.”

However, group purposes do not remain static and unchanged in the course of development of a virtual community. Both Springdale and AutumnLeaves had to tackle the issue of re-considering their original missions and objectives, in face of an expanding user base. When Springdale management discovered that Malaysian students had been participating in the discussion forums, they realized that they might have to modify their earlier objectives. “Initially we wanted to develop as a community of PRC students in Singapore,” said the Chief Editor,

“but now we need to change that. We need to develop into a community of Chinese-speaking students in Singapore.”

Similarly, AutumnLeaves initially targeted PRC Chinese in Singapore and in China, and was seeking to “unite all *zhongguoren* (people of the Chinese state) in Singapore,” but as the management found that many Singaporeans were also participating in the BBS, the mission and objective turned to “gathering all *huaren* (people of Chinese origin) through the Internet, to promote interaction amongst ethnic Chinese all over the world.”⁸

Content

The main parts of the contents in the Springdale website include campus news, information for PRC students on studying and living in Singapore, collections of prose and poetry written by Springdale users, as well as online forums covering various themes.

Most of the Springdale users are PRC students in NUS and NTU whose university education is sponsored by the Singapore government. The immediate context in which Springdale users spend most of their time, that is, the university environment, bears upon the selection of news that are featured on the index page of the website. The news items cover various forthcoming campus events (such as the concert performances by the NUS Symphonic Band), announcements of university policies that would affect international students, as well as notices of offline activities organized by Springdale. Springdale also provides useful information for PRC students before and upon their arrival in Singapore, to help freshmen settle down in the new environment. For instance there are articles on public transport in Singapore, dealing with hostel management, glossary of Singlish phrases, and places for food and entertainment.

The online forums are the interactive component of the Springdale website and attract the highest amount of traffic. The discussion forums cover various themes such as Creative Writing, Chat, Current Affairs, Living and Working in Singapore, and so on. Users can buy and sell items or look for rental accommodation at the Marketplace Forum. In addition, a series of special forums were introduced in March 2003, called “Springdale Clubs.” These forums cater to users with specific hobbies or interests, for example, soccer, photography, swordfighting novels, chess etc. Table 1 gives a list of the Springdale forums and clubs as at March 2003.

The AutumnLeaves website carries similar contents as that of Springdale — mainly news, information on studying and living in Singapore, information on education and migration policies of Singapore and various online discussion forums. However, the news and information on AutumnLeaves appeal to a different target audience. News stories in the AutumnLeaves website cover the online and offline activities of the virtual community, as well as articles on the

Table 1. Online Forums in the Springdale Website (as at March 2003)

Springdale Forums
Creative Writing (<i>yuanchuang wenxue</i> 原创文学)
In the Mood for Chat (<i>xinqing xianliao</i> 心情闲聊)
Current Affairs (<i>jaodian luntan</i> 焦点论坛)
Burning Questions (<i>yinan wenda</i> 疑难问答)
Springdale Radio Station (<i>yinyue pindao</i> 音乐频道)
Coursework (<i>xuehai shenchou</i> 学海深仇)
Suggestions & Feedback (<i>yijian luntan</i> 意见论坛)
Living and Working in Singapore (<i>shicheng shenghuo</i> 狮城生活)
Small Talk (<i>guanshui tiandi</i> 灌水天地)
Sharing Online Resources (<i>ziyuan gongxiang</i> 资源共享)
Marketplace (<i>ziyou jishi</i> 自由集市)
Springdale Clubs
Food and Lifestyle (<i>shise xingye</i> 食色性也)
Movies (<i>yingwuzhe</i> 影舞者)
Chess (<i>wuru qitu</i> 悟入棋途)
Soccer (<i>luyin zhi fengcai</i> 绿荫的风采)
Photography (<i>guang yu ying</i> 光与影)
Philosophy (<i>tongyin bieguan</i> 桐音别馆)
Travel (<i>luxing tianxia</i> 旅行天下)
Computer Games (<i>youxi rensheng</i> 游戏人生)
Swordfighting Novels (<i>xiagu rouqing</i> 侠骨柔情)

plight and experiences of Chinese migrant workers in Singapore. The latter are obtained from online news websites such as Sina.com, Channel News Asia, Zaobao.com and so on. Notably neither Springdale nor AutumnLeaves features news of events in mainland China; both websites initially featured news on events in China, but users' feedback was that they preferred a more local (Singapore) focus in the news, as they could easily obtain breaking news of happenings in China from the larger news portals like Sina and Sohu.

The main attraction at the AutumnLeaves website is still the BBS. AutumnLeaves has a wider range of forums than Springdale. Besides forums for exchanging information and forums based on hobbies and interests, the AutumnLeaves BBS has two kinds of forums that are not available on Springdale — school forums and native-place forums. The school forums allow PRC students from a particular school in Singapore to meet their schoolmates online. For instance, many PRC students are training to be nurses in Nanyang Polytechnic, Singapore. They can visit the Nanyang Polytechnic Forum to interact with their schoolmates and

classmates. The native-place forums allow AutumnLeaves users to find online friends from the same native-place in China. The native-place forums are organized around the various provinces or regions in China. For instance, a PRC migrant from Shandong province can visit the Shandong Forum, and he will be able to meet other users who hail from Shandong. Table 2 lists the various discussion forums available on AutumnLeaves in May 2003.

Table 2. Online forums in the AutumnLeaves Website (as at May 2003)

Forums for Exchange of Information
Chat/Small talk (<i>shicheng shuiku</i> 狮城水库)
Newcomers (<i>xinren baodao</i> 新人报到)
Studying in Singapore (<i>liuxue shicheng</i> 留学狮城)
Employment & Migration (<i>jiuye yimin</i> 就业移民)
Exams & Higher Learning (<i>xuexi shenzao</i> 学习深造)
Living in Singapore (<i>shicheng shenghuo</i> 狮城生活)
Special Forum on SARS (<i>SARS zhuanlan</i> SARS 专栏)
Creative Writing (<i>qinggan wenxue</i> 情感文学)
Movie Downloads (<i>yingshi pindao</i> 影视频道)
Classified Ads (<i>fenlei guanggao</i> 分类广告)
Photo Albums (<i>shicheng xiangce</i> 狮城相册)
Suggestions & Feedback (<i>zhanwu guanli</i> 站务管理)
Hobbies/Interests
Travel (<i>zoubian tianxia</i> 走遍天下)
Sports (<i>tiyu shijie</i> 体育世界)
Fashion and Style (<i>liuxing shishang</i> 流行时尚)
Arts and Culture (<i>yishu kuangxiang</i> 艺术狂想)
“Adult” Topics (<i>chengren huati</i> 成人话题)
Gaming (<i>youxi tiandi</i> 游戏天地)
Computers (<i>diannao luntan</i> 电脑论坛)
Music (<i>yinyue guodu</i> 音乐国度)
Personal BBS (<i>geren bankuai</i> 个人版块)
School Forums
National University of Singapore
Nanyang Technological University
Nanyang Polytechnic
Singapore Polytechnic
Ngee Ann Polytechnic
Temasek Polytechnic

Table 2. (continued)

School Forums

Nanyang Fine Arts Academy
La Salle-SIA College of the Arts
AIT Academy
Management Development Institute of Singapore
Informatics
Singapore Accountancy Academy
Portman Business School

Native-place Forums

Northeast China
Beijing
Hubei
Shandong
Shanghai
Jiangsu
Zhejiang
Anhui
Sichuan
Hunan
Fujian
Guangdong
Hainan
Western China

Offline Activities

A number of empirical studies have affirmed the Internet's propensity in enabling friendship formation and have found that online relationships often move to the offline context (Katz and Aspden 1997; Kendall 1998; Parks and Floyd 1996). For the AutumnLeaves community, three interviewees held the same view that the BBS "felt like home," and attributed the feeling of home to the relationships that forum participants had cultivated over time. These relationships were nurtured through interaction in both online and offline contexts.

Both Springdale and AutumnLeaves have an Activities department specially dedicated to planning and organizing offline activities for the virtual community. The offline projects carried out by the Springdale management are usually aimed at serving the needs of the PRC students who are sponsored by the Singapore government to study in Singapore universities. Since the year 2000, Springdale

has been publishing a freshmen's handbook in hard copy every year, providing useful advice for new PRC students to help them settle into the campus environment as well as the larger Singapore society. Moreover, Springdale has been collaborating with local media and community organizations in organizing career seminars for PRC students for the past two years. Offline activities organized by the AutumnLeaves management tend to be casual like barbeque parties and special get-togethers for festive occasions. For instance, some 60 people turned up for the barbeque party to celebrate the traditional Chinese Mooncake Festival in 2002.

Identity Options in Virtual Communities of New Chinese Migrants

As I have discussed earlier, previous literature has shown that the Internet presents two kinds of forces in the way a nation is imagined by online communities. On the one hand there are centralizing tendencies through which members of the virtual community use the electronic space to foster a sense of solidarity based on the place of origin. On the other hand, there are multiple and diverse viewpoints on the Internet, so there would not be a single dominant discourse of the nation.

In the case of AutumnLeaves, the diversification and segmentation forces were set in place by the native-place forums that the website offered to its users. David, the founder of AutumnLeaves, said that he set up the native-place forums because he noticed that the BBS participants often posted messages like: "Where are you from?", "Are there any folks from Guangdong?" and so on. So he set up a series of native-place forums classified by province/region, allowing the PRC migrants to seek out online friends from the same city or hometown. He also acceded to the request made by some users originating from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and set up native-place forums for these two places.

As a virtual community, AutumnLeaves offered options of sub-national or regional identities for its members. Users from the same province organized their own little offline gatherings and "chatted" on the forum by typing text in the style of their regional or local dialects. Respondents from the in-depth interviews also conceded that they felt a greater sense of affinity with people from the same hometown or native-place in China.

Although the AutumnLeaves forums allowed identification with native-place, the management of the website consciously projected a Chinese national identity that acted as a homogenizing force to counterbalance the diversity of interests, topics and native-place identities in the BBS. This national identity assumed different forms and occurred at different levels, as one could observe from the postings on the BBS and in the offline activities of the community. One of these was the celebration of the birth of the People's Republic of China. On 1 October

2003, the National Day of PRC, the management of AutumnLeaves posted a congratulatory message on the BBS:

On behalf of all PRC students and workers, AutumnLeaves wishes our motherland prosperity. For another year, we are celebrating the birthday of China overseas. I believe many overseas Chinese students are sending their best wishes to China. On this joyous day, AutumnLeaves hopes that all PRC students overseas will still be emotionally attached to China while they are abroad. Study hard, let's build a more powerful and more prosperous homeland!

A few days after the posting of the message, the management organized a barbeque for AutumnLeaves users. When the barbeque drew to an end, one of the management committee members suggested that as the PRC National Day was just over, it would be appropriate for PRC students overseas to express their patriotism by singing the national anthem. So everyone got up and sang the national anthem with gusto, inviting some stares from Singaporean passers-by.

The national anthem, of course, was one of the national symbols instituted by the CCP upon the establishment of PRC in 1949. For the young PRC student who posted the congratulatory message, the birthday of *China* was equated with the birth of the People's Republic created by the CCP. After years of "patriotic education" under the Party/State, the Chinese youth today could only have recourse to symbols of state nationalism in expressing "love for their country," despite the fact that most of them had already lost faith in socialism.

On another occasion, AutumnLeaves held an offline gathering to commemorate the second anniversary of the website. During the gathering the organizers distributed the lyrics of a song, titled "Great China." The first two stanzas read:

We have a home, its name is China,
With many brothers and sisters, and beautiful scenery.
Two dragons lie at home, they are Yangtze River and Yellow River,
and the highest mountain is Everest.

We have a home, its name is China,
With many brothers and sisters, and beautiful scenery.
Look at the Great Wall that stretches afar in the clouds,
Look at the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau that is wider than the firmament!
...

The song alluded to the *national body*,⁹ including familiar features in the physical landscape of China, such as the Great Wall and the Yellow River. More importantly, it repeatedly mentioned Tibet, upon which the Chinese state had staked claims of territorial sovereignty. From the overt gestures of the AutumnLeaves management, both online and offline, it appeared that they were offering a national identity that was based on identification with the bounded territorial state of PRC, relying heavily on national symbols created by the Party/State.

This confirms the observation by Chiu and Tan (2004: 13) that new Chinese migrants, unlike the old immigrants, tend to have “a strong identification with the modern Chinese state.”

Such a combination of *statist national identity* and *territorial national identity* (based on the constructs suggested by He and Guo 2000) would exclude participants in the AutumnLeaves forums who were not PRC citizens and those who did not subscribe to the political ideology of the PRC, such as Chinese Singaporeans and Taiwanese. However, this issue seemed to have been well taken care of because the AutumnLeaves website also offered a pan-Chinese identity. After a revamp of the webpage design in May 2003, the background of the AutumnLeaves webpage displayed a pattern of dragon motifs. The dragon was purportedly a totem used by the ancient Huaxia tribe in China, who were the ancestors of the Han people. Hence the Chinese regard themselves as “descendants of the dragon” and the dragon has long been a symbol of Chinese civilization and culture, albeit a Han-centered culture. The symbol of the dragon could interpellate the Taiwanese and Singaporean participants through an ethnic or cultural identity, based on common (Han) ancestry and shared language. It could send a subtle message to Taiwanese and Chinese Singaporeans who visited the website, as if to say, “You are the descendants of the dragon, you are welcome to join our virtual community.”

Therefore on one level the AutumnLeaves management sought to unite the mainland Chinese users by emphasizing a PRC national identity. On another level, it employed a pan-Chinese cultural identity to appeal to other Chinese users who did not see themselves as citizens of PRC. From the findings presented above, it is apparent that one of the virtual communities, AutumnLeaves, offered various identity options to its members in the forms of (a) statist Chinese national identity; (b) territorial Chinese national identity; (c) ethnic Chinese identity based on common ancestry; and (d) sub-national native-place identities.

In contrast to AutumnLeaves, the Springdale website did not offer distinct options for national or sub-national/native place identities. This is clearly evident from the passive and silent stance of the Springdale management toward the PRC National Day on 1 October 2003. There was a surge of congratulatory messages from the participants of the Current Affairs forum in Springdale, but the management did not post any “official” congratulatory statements on the website to mark the occasion. A representative from the unofficial PRC students’ society in NUS posted a message saying that mini PRC flags would be given away in one of the NUS canteens. Other participants in the Current Affairs forum had to *request* the moderator to place the message as a sticky post (a sticky post is typically an important notice or announcement that is placed at the top of the forum, so that subsequent threads would be displayed below the sticky thread).

In fact, it was a deliberate decision by the Springdale management not to adopt a particular position on the identity issues or problems faced by PRC students. Jiayuan, who was then Chief Editor at the time of the interview, asserted:

Springdale is a non-partisan organization. We are a medium, a platform...as long as you do not engage in illegal activities online, as long as you do not espouse racism or incite hatred or crime, as long as you don't engage in flaming, we allow all kinds of opinions and free discussion on the forums.... Some PRC students are more "Singaporeanized" in the way they speak and in their thought, whereas some still maintain a very strong China identity and see themselves as different from Singaporeans. There are all sorts of views and opinions, and there has been some debate in Springdale over this issue. In such circumstances we usually ensure that the discussion is carried out in an orderly manner, we don't have restrictions on the viewpoints in the forums.... There isn't a mainstream identity, everyone has different views.

The management team of a particular virtual community is often seen to exercise a conscious policy decision as to whether the community offers certain identity options to its members in terms of ethnic or national belonging. A virtual community may not necessarily project a clear distinct position on national identity or ethnic identity, as in the case of Springdale. What might be the reason for the divergent practices observed in Springdale and AutumnLeaves? It was not because AutumnLeaves happened to have a management team with stronger nationalistic inclinations. It actually had much to do with positioning the virtual community and constructing a unique identity for it, in order to attract and retain the members.

One of the problems associated with virtual communities is that participants can join or leave a community whenever they please. This fluidity in membership implies that communities created by computer-mediated communication (CMC) are more unstable than traditional communities based on geographical proximity or ethnic origins (Fernback and Thompson 1995). For the administrators of Springdale and AutumnLeaves, one of the primary concerns of the management was to maintain the membership of the community. This had to be achieved by generating a high level of interest and participation in the forums, and cultivating a strong sense of "we-feeling" and belonging to the virtual community.

For Springdale, it was a more homogeneous group because most of the users shared common experiences of being PRC students in NUS and NTU. Users who were not from these two universities made up only about 10 percent of the Springdale visitors. But in the case of AutumnLeaves, the majority of users in Singapore were scattered in various commercial schools and polytechnics, and the management could not afford to alienate the significant numbers of users (some 30 percent) who were based in mainland China. It would be more difficult to build a sense of solidarity with such a diverse profile of participants, and this could account for the emphasis placed on Chinese national identity by the AutumnLeaves management.

Moreover, Springdale and AutumnLeaves were not the only virtual communities made up of new Chinese migrants (including PRC students) in Singapore, there were a few other BBSs that catered to a similar target audience, for instance, *renzai shicheng* (Living in the Lion City) in the Wenxuecity website, as well as the Summer BBS set up by PRC students in NTU. During their interviews with the researcher and in their closed-door face-to-face meetings with the moderators, the office-bearers of Springdale and AutumnLeaves demonstrated a keen sense of awareness about the other virtual communities established by mainland Chinese in Singapore. In fact, the Springdale management had invited the webmaster of AutumnLeaves to a dialogue session to exchange their experiences in managing a virtual community. There were also undercurrents of competition amongst these various virtual communities for membership and user loyalty. Yang Qiang, the person in charge of marketing for the AutumnLeaves website, recounted how a smaller rival website (now defunct) even tried to poach members from AutumnLeaves by making a false declaration that the two websites had undergone a merger.

Therefore, constructing a group identity based on a Chinese national identity oriented toward the PRC state could be one of the strategies to distinguish AutumnLeaves from other virtual communities established by PRC migrants in Singapore. For instance, Feng Hao, one of the AutumnLeaves administrators, explained that the management had planned to sing the song “Great China” during the offline gathering on 28 June 2003, in order to build top-of-mind awareness of the website:

This song was very popular in China a few years go, it's not a pop song, it's a patriotic song. We thought about using it at our gathering because we wanted to unite all the *huaren* in Singapore, to strengthen their pride in the nation (*minzu*) and their patriotic feelings!! This is to guide them into associating our website with the motherland. Whenever they think of China, whenever they think of home, they will remember our website.

Ironically the AutumnLeaves administrators tended to use “*huaren*” (ethnic Chinese) — the term adopted by Singaporeans to refer to local-born Chinese Singaporeans — when they actually meant “*zhongguoren*” (Chinese from China). But the term “*huaren*” was used so that in gathering the PRC Chinese in Singapore and in mainland China, the AutumnLeaves website would not alienate other Singapore-based users who were Taiwanese, Hong Kongers and Chinese Singaporeans. This was in line with AutumnLeaves's latest goal in reaching out to Chinese all over the world; it was an attempt by a virtual community to reconcile two Chinese nations: (a) the PRC plus the people of Taiwan, Hongkong and Macau, and (b) Chinese who dwell in other parts of the world but retain a continuing sense of political or cultural attachment to China (Townsend 1996: 28). Nevertheless, its efforts in orienting the AutumnLeaves users toward a Chinese national identity through national symbols of the PRC state would only

perpetuate a hegemonic mainland identity, thus marginalizing and subordinating other “varieties” of Chinese identity in different parts of the world.

Discussion and Conclusion

One of the hallmarks of diasporic Chinese communities is the proliferation of clan associations and other community organizations. Along with ethnic media, they are seen as important players in defining Chinese identity, in mediating between native-place ties and the environment of the host society. In fact, Chinese organizations, Chinese-language education and Chinese media work in a tripartite and complementary relationship in strengthening and maintaining Chinese culture in diasporic Chinese communities (Suryadinata 1997, cited in Sun 2005).

Sun Wanning has lamented that despite the significance of Chinese-language media in the Chinese diaspora, there is insufficient academic attention devoted to the study of the “global Chinese media network,” and its impact on Chinese transnational imagination (Sun 2005: 68–69). This study contributes to this domain of research through the analysis of websites established by new Chinese migrants. More importantly, the Internet is not only conceptualized merely as a form of new media. I argue that cybercommunities that grow out of the interaction of people visiting these websites have the potential of becoming like community organizations and associations formed by Chinese migrants in their host society.

Earlier in the paper, I have explained three models of Ward (1965) adopted by Li (1970) in understanding the construction of cultural identities by Chinese communities. The immediate model is concerned with the cultural characteristics that identify the group itself. The second is the internal observer model which positions the community in relation to other dialect groups. The third is the ideological model which constructs the group’s belonging to a pan-Chinese cultural community. The old overseas Chinese communities constructed their identities mainly in terms of the immediate and internal observer models, through native place and surname associations. On the other hand, new Chinese migrant communities subscribe to the ideological model in that their organizations “project a pan-Chinese identity, and legitimize themselves by identifying with at least some elements of the officially promoted discourse of belonging to the PRC” (Nyíri 1999: 125).

Before the influx of *xin yimin* in the 1990s, the early Chinese immigrants in colonial Singapore had set up a variety of associations to meet the physical, social and cultural needs of their fellow-migrants, and these social organizations could be classified broadly into (a) surname associations; (b) territorial associations (based on the immigrants’ places of origin in China); (c) dialect associations; and (d) guilds based on similar skills or occupations (Tan 1986).¹⁰ The dialect/locality

and surname associations (collectively called clan associations) were most common (Cheng 1995).

With the renewed flow of migrants from China in the past decade, there has been news coverage of traditional clan associations in Singapore admitting new Chinese migrants as members. In fact, offline community associations have been established to cater to the social and cultural needs of new Chinese migrants in Singapore. For instance, Tianfu Tongxianghui was formed in the year 2000 by the new migrants from Sichuan province (*Lianhe Zaobao*, 26 Nov. 2001) and Huayuan Association was inaugurated in May 2001 for new migrants who have obtained permanent residence and citizenship, regardless of native-place origins in China (*Lianhe Zaobao*, 12 April 2001). The former mobilizes a regional/dialect identity (immediate model) while the latter does not claim affiliation to a particular locality within China, and adopts pan-Chinese identity based on ties to a common country of origin, that is, the People's Republic of China (ideological model).

New Chinese migrants are more educated and mobile than their "predecessors" who left China before Communist rule was established over the mainland. Increasingly, new Chinese migrants do not only rely on offline clan associations, churches, sports clubs or other immigrant organizations to help them ease into the host country. They are forming their own communities which are based in cyberspace. These are new social formations in which Chinese migrants organize themselves. The main objective of this study is to investigate whether virtual communities formed by migrants would offer identity options to its members in relation to ethnic and national belonging, as immigrant associations typically do.

The conclusion is that a virtual community may or may not offer distinct identity options to its members in terms of ethnic or national belonging. This is a policy decision on the part of the management echelons in the social hierarchy of the community. From the study it appears that virtual communities with very diverse user profiles (such as AutumnLeaves) have to employ a different strategy in attracting and retaining members, compared to campus-based virtual communities (such as Springdale) with a more homogenous membership united by common experiences in the university context. As such the former has to offer distinct identity options for their members. For instance, AutumnLeaves tries to unite the PRC migrants and the mainland Chinese users by emphasizing a statist and territorial national identity centered around the PRC. On the other hand, it projects a pan-Chinese cultural identity through the dragon motif on the background of its webpage, and through frequent usage of the term *huaren*, a broader term that denotes Chinese ethnicity without political connotations. This pan-Chinese cultural identity would appeal to Chinese users who do not see themselves as citizens of PRC (such as the Taiwanese and Singaporean users).

However, while offering pan-Chinese identity options both in the forms of a civic/territorial national identity and an ethnic or genealogical identity based on

common descent from the Yellow Emperor, the AutumnLeaves website also allows members to seek out fellow-nationals from the same province or region in China, through native-place forums. While the website is able to incorporate the immediate and internal observer models, the ideological model emphasizing belonging to a pan-Chinese cultural community is still dominant. Most participants join the virtual community because it is a meeting-place for Chinese nationals, as pointed out by one of the AutumnLeaves users whom I interviewed:

We are in the BBS on the premise that all of us are *zhongguoren*, everyone is a *zhongguoren*. We won't introduce ourselves in terms of the places we come from, you will only see that in the native-place forums.

Moreover, some of the native-place forums are relatively quiet and generally they do not attract as many posts as the most popular thematic forums in the AutumnLeaves BBS, such as Chat/Small Talk Forum (*shicheng shuiku*) and Adult Topics Forum (*chengren huati*). Nonetheless, one can see that virtual communities are able to offer a wider repertoire of identity options, both at national and sub-national levels, to new Chinese migrants than offline immigrant associations. Offline immigrant associations, on the other hand, tend to be restricted to only a singular cultural identity within a single organization — either a dialect/locality-based identity such as that of the Tianfu Tongxianghui, or a pan-Chinese identity as offered by Huayuan. While an offline immigrant association may only project a singular Chinese national identity, an online community can offer multiple forms of Chinese national identity and even subethnic native-place identities, all within a single platform on the Internet. This further reinforces Mitra's (1997b) view that Internet websites are able to address both ingroup and outgroup users simultaneously, through textual strategies such as format, language, multimedia and links.

In his study of the new Chinese migrants in Hungary, Nyíri (1999:126) has suggested a decline in the importance of native-place or *qiaoxiang* ties treasured by the traditional overseas Chinese communities, as the shared identity of the new transnational Chinese community now “conforms to a pan-Chinese ‘ideological model’.” “The symbolic core of the new transnational Chinese community is not the *qiaoxiang* but Peking” (Nyíri 1999: 68).

An important point to note is that this pan-Chinese identity is centered upon the modern PRC state and it relies, to a large extent, on the official rhetoric and national symbols of the PRC (Nyíri 1999). The ideological model originally postulated by Ward (1965), on the other hand, refers to a pan-Chinese cultural identity based upon Confucian traditions. Here, I have illustrated how virtual communities formed by new Chinese migrants offer identity options to its members, much like offline immigrant organizations. The study has shown that the ideological model of pan-Chinese identity centered around the modern PRC

state tends to play a more dominant role in the identity options proffered by cybercommunities that new Chinese migrants have established in their host society. Options of sub-ethnic regional identities are simultaneously offered by the virtual community, but are seen as less significant by participants of the online forums. For these virtual communities, the reference to a cultural genealogical identity (emphasizing consanguinity of all Chinese based on descent from the Yellow Emperor) is rather subliminal, as seen in the case of AutumnLeaves.

In her analysis of the Nanjing Massacre virtual archive on the China News Digest website, Sun (2002) asserts that the transnational imagination of Chinese migrants from the PRC is tied to the bounded territorial state of China and collective memories of a historized nation. She notes that these new Chinese migrants pursue an essentialized notion of Chinese identity in cyberspace, as an attempt to reconcile themselves to their conditions of displacement and dispersal from the homeland in real life. In this case study of virtual communities formed by new Chinese migrants in Singapore, the identity options offered by AutumnLeaves at the organizational level, do tend toward essentialist notions of Chinese identity — in terms of national identity centered on a bounded territorial state, as well as ethnic Chinese identity based on common ancestry originating in the Yellow Emperor.

However, members of the virtual community do not always readily take up the identity options offered by the organizers of that community. Their identity discourses are by no means limited to the identity options offered by the leaders of the virtual community. I have discussed elsewhere how virtual communities formed by new Chinese migrants from mainland China produce alternative discourses that challenge or speak up against (a) the official concept of the Chinese Nation (*zhonghua minzu*) endorsed by the PRC government; (b) popular notions of Han national identity; and (c) the statist/socialist national identity propagated by the PRC government (Chan 2005). The analysis of postings on online forums frequented by these new Chinese migrants shows that Chinese identity can vacillate between multiplicity and essentialism. In response to internal events in China, the participants negotiate various constructs of Chinese identity such as statist national identity, Han identity and ethnic identities of minorities in China. But in events that deal with a foreign Other, they fall back on a civilizational Chinese identity (Chan 2005).

Indeed, the Chinese transnational imagination is marked by tension, ambivalence and unevenness (Sun 2005; Wong 2003), hence Sun (2005) has called for context-specific approaches in studying the relationship between media and Chinese diasporic subjectivities. This is a case study of cybercommunities established by new Chinese migrants who are working and studying in Singapore. While Chinese migrants in various parts of the world face the same dilemmas and problems in adapting to the host society and maintaining ties with the homeland, these two

virtual communities do present distinct characteristics found in the unique context of Singapore and as such, the findings may not apply readily to Chinese migrants in other countries. Firstly, the small size of Singapore means that the members of virtual communities can meet face-to-face easily, thus facilitating the formation of hybrid cybercommunities that combine computer-mediated communication with face-to-face interaction. This may not be possible for virtual communities formed by migrants who are scattered in distant locales across a vast area in the same host society.

The second issue has to do with the political milieu in Singapore. The strict regulations regarding public assembly and registration of societies means that the Singaporean authorities do not normally give permission for protests and demonstrations. Compared to the virtual communities formed by Chinese migrants in North America who are able to lobby for the rights and protection of the Chinese community in the host country (as described by Wu 1999 and Liu 1999), there is limited scope for the types of activism open to virtual communities in Singapore, especially when it comes to mobilizing and organizing protests or demonstrations.

Furthermore, this paper relates only the experiences of virtual communities established by Chinese migrants from the PRC. Even within the same host society, various vehicles in Chinese-language diasporic media will target and cater to different groups of Chinese migrants from different places of origin (such as Taiwan and Hong Kong). As Sun (2005) suggests, comparative analyses of PRC migrants with Chinese migrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan and other areas will be meaningful in capturing the heterogeneity of the Chinese diaspora within and across various socio-political contexts.

In the world where “ethnoscapes” or transnational movements of people are no longer unilinear flows (Appadurai 1996), the Internet allows the deterritorialized migrants to “re-embed” and recover a sense of *place* in the virtual communities of cyberspace, where social relations can be re-established with their fellow-nationals in a different context. This study has shown that a virtual community may or may not offer distinct identity options to its members in terms of ethnic or national belonging. Virtual communities with very diverse user profiles may offer more distinct identity options for their members as a strategy in attracting and retaining members, compared to virtual communities with a more homogeneous membership. Amidst undercurrents of competition from other websites established by new Chinese migrants, projecting a strong Chinese national identity is also one of the ways in which a particular virtual community seeks to distinguish itself from other similar communities, in a bid to attract and retain members whose loyalty and commitment is far more transient than in offline communities.

The present study suggests the possibility of further research on how virtual communities co-exist with offline immigrant associations in meeting the cultural needs of new Chinese migrants. Members of the two virtual communities selected

for case study are relatively young. The interviewees are single and below 30 years old. These younger migrants are in the earlier stages of migration and they may or may not settle permanently in Singapore. They are also the ones who can spend more time on the Internet. This study has not been able to capture some of the older and more settled migrants who are living in Singapore with their spouses and children. These middle-aged migrants may prefer to join offline immigrant associations (such as Huayuan), instead of “hanging out” at online forums. It will be illuminating to do a case study of an offline immigrant association, and to compare it with the virtual communities. This will deepen our understanding of the extent to which virtual communities can complement or replace the functions of immigrant associations in the maintenance of cultural identities by migrants.

Notes

- ¹ The Chinese version of an earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 4th Conference of Media and Communication in Chinese Civilization, Hong Kong, 23–27 Sept. 2005.
- ² Nyíri (2001: 145) explains that the new term *xin yimin* “obscures the traditional official dichotomy of *huaqiao* (Chinese citizens residing overseas) and *huaren* (ethnic Chinese citizens of foreign countries).”
- ³ This paper focuses only on identity options in ethnic and national identity, and I will not discuss identity options in terms of religion, gender, age and class, although I agree with Leung (1999) that ethnicity intersects with religion, with other ethnicities, with gender and with age in the construction of Chinese identity.
- ⁴ Tu Wei-Ming (1994) has postulated a concept of “Cultural China,” which is made up of three symbolic universes. The first comprises societies in which ethnic Chinese form a numerical majority of the population, namely mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. The second refers to the scattered Chinese communities in various parts of the world, which are often collectively called “overseas Chinese,” although the Chinese in these communities may have settled in their host societies for several generations. The third consists of writers, scholars, journalists, entrepreneurs and other individuals who have contributed significantly to the intellectual discourse on China.
- ⁵ Professional/technical personnel and skilled workers can apply for permanent residence if they already have obtained work passes in Singapore.
- ⁶ To protect the identities of the participants, the names of the virtual communities and interviewees have been changed; pseudonyms are used.
- ⁷ Unlike a registered society under Singapore law, Springdale is a virtual community and is not required to have an Annual General Meeting, but the leaders of the community have laid down organizational rules, proceedings and structures that mimic an organization to a large extent.
- ⁸ *Zhongguoren*, which can be translated as “people or citizens of the Chinese state,” carries notions of citizenship or political affiliation with China. *Huaren* means “people of Chinese origin,” referring to a common ancestry and culture, without necessarily alluding to any political ties with China (Tu 1994). To the ordinary Chinese in China, however, the term *zhongguoren* is used to refer to a citizen of the Chinese state as well as a person of Chinese ancestry. The term carries both notions of national and ethnic identity. The PRC migrants

begin to encounter the word *huaren* more often when they arrive in Singapore, because the local-born Chinese Singaporeans call themselves *huaren*. For Chinese Singaporeans, the term *zhongguoren* is a marker of one's political identity and nationality, so they would call themselves *huaren* (which denotes only ethnicity). It is important to preserve the nuanced differences in meaning between the terms, hence I retain the terms *zhongguoren* and *huaren* when quoting the interviewees or online text in the websites.

- ⁹ Kolakowski, cited in Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl and Liebhart (1999), says that national identity is characterized by the following aspects: (1) the idea of a national spirit; (2) historical memory; (3) anticipation and future orientation; (4) the notion of the national body; and (5) a nameable beginning. The *national spirit* is manifest in certain cultural forms of life and collective manners of behavior. *Anticipation and future orientation* means that a nation is forward-looking and will always make plans for potential crises. The *national body* is linked to the discussions of national territories, landscapes and physical artefacts.
- ¹⁰ However, the associations operated in a rather complicated hierarchy and it was difficult to differentiate sharply between associations based on shared dialect, locality, kinship and occupation. For instance, people from the same village or province from China would obviously speak the same dialect (Freedman 1967).

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