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CYBERPUBLICS AND DIASPORA POLITICS AMONG TRANSNATIONAL CHINESE

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citizenship

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overseas Chinese

transnationality

In August 1998, a global Chinese (huaren) website mobilized worldwide protests against anti-Chinese attacks in Indonesia triggered by the Asian financial crisis. This set of events provides the occasion for a discussion of the necessary conceptual distinction between diaspora and transnationalism. I maintain that diaspora as permanent political exile is often conflated with contemporary forms of fairly unrestricted mobility. 'Diaspora', however, gets increasingly invoked by affluent migrants in transnational contexts to articulate an inclusive global ethnicity for disparate populations the world over who may be able to claim a common racial or cultural ancestry.

I use the term 'translocal publics' to describe the new kinds of disembedded diaspora identifications enabled by technologies and forums of opinion-making. I consider the promise and the danger of cyber diaspora politics that intervene on behalf of co-ethnics in distant lands. The rise of such diaspora politics may inspire in the members an unjustified sense that cyber-based humanitarian interventions will invariably produce positive results for intended beneficiaries.

The Huaren cyberpublic promotes itself as an electronic watchdog for ethnic Chinese communities across the world. But, while ethnic Chinese in Indonesia were grateful for the spotlight cast on their plight, some felt cyber misrepresentations of events and criticisms of Indonesia jeopardized their attempts to commit themselves as Indonesian citizens. Thus, Internet-based articulation of a disembedded global racial citizenship can create invidious essential differences between ethnic others and natives, deepening rather than

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reducing already existing political and social divisions within particular nations. In short, discourses of a racialized diaspora raise the question of who is accountable to whom in a transnationalized world.

The triggering event

In August 1997 a financial firestorm swept through Southeast Asia, bringing chaos and suffering to millions in Suharto's Indonesia. Following the precipitous decline of the rupiah in late 1997, millions of Indonesian workers laid off from their jobs returned to poverty-stricken neighborhoods and villages. A picture of Suharto signing away his power, with the stern IMF chief standing over him, his arms crossed, had been a widely-publicized image of national humiliation.[1] A handful of army generals, indigenous business competitors and Muslim intellectuals deflected anger against the ruling elite by stirring racist nationalist feelings against ethnic Chinese. Indonesian Chinese were called 'new-style colonialists … who plunder the people's wealth' and traitors who keep their wealth in US dollars and send their money overseas. Rumors flew about Chinese shopkeepers hoarding food, raising food prices, and Chinese 'traitors' fleeing the country with ill-gotten capital. Combined with the invisibility and unpredictability of market forces, such metaphors of evil turned fears into rage.

1 The IMF imposed disciplinary conditions for loans, requiring the Indonesian state to cut subsidies for basic commodities such as flour and cooking oil. Millions of Indonesians driven to the edge of starvation turned their anger against the most visible target, ethnic Chinese shopkeepers.

In May 1998 and the following weeks, ordinary people looted and burned Chinese stores and homes, while soldiers stood by, observing a destruction that mimicked the devastation visited on the lives of the poor. In the chaos of the destruction, soldiers disguised as hooligans were reported to have attacked dozens of girls and women, many of whom were ethnic Chinese. Human rights activists claimed that the rapes were organized rampage by military men out of uniform. A related process of witch-hunting was set off by rumors about anonymous men in black called ninjas who killed Muslim leaders and dumped their mutilated bodies in mosques. In some neighborhoods, local vigilante groups hunted for ninjas who were killed on sight, their heads paraded on pikes. Such grisly attacks, and the demands by the masses for some kind of redistribution of 'Chinese' wealth in favor of the *pribumi* (indigenous) population, again made the scapegoat community stand for the ravages of the global markets.

It is important to note that, while ethnic and religious differences have long existed in Indonesia, under Suharto's New Order regime (1969–98) a few Chinese tycoons (*cukong*) enjoyed special political access which enabled them to amass huge fortunes and dominate sectors of the economy. The majority of ethnic Chinese (numbering some four million) are small business operators, professionals and working people who bear the brunt of a historical legacy of anti-Chinese sentiments and suffer from a legal status as racialized

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citizens.[2] The Suharto government, through inaction, had practically 'legalized' attacks on Chinese property and persons, allowing the army to manipulate events to displace anger against the Suharto regime onto the ethnic Chinese (Coppel 1999). The seeming global indifference sparked an international response among ethnic Chinese communities around the world, linked through the Internet.[3]

2 For a brief historical view of anti-Chinese discriminations in Indonesia, see Skinner (1963). For a recent overview of the politics of Chinese economic domination, see Schwarz (1994).

The rise of a Huaren cyberpublic

On 7 August 1998, and the days following, coordinated rallies protested the anti-Chinese violence in front of Indonesian embassies and consulates in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Asia. These rallies were held mainly in cities in the West – Atlanta, Boston, Calgary, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Toronto, Vancouver, and Washington. In Asia, demonstrations took place only in Hong Kong, Manila, and Beijing. China issued a rare warning to Indonesia over redress for the victims of the riots and mass rapes.

The global protests were organized through a new website called Global Huaren ('Global Chinese People'), set up by a Malaysian Chinese emigrant in New Zealand called Joe Tan. Enraged by the seeming indifference of New Zealanders and the world to the anti-Chinese attacks, Tan linked up with ethnic Chinese engineers and professionals in Canada, Australia, and the United States, who saw parallels between the plight of Chinese in Indonesia and European Jews. They established the World Huaren Federation (WHF) in order 'to foster a stronger sense of identity among Chinese people everywhere, not to promote Chinese chauvinism but rather racial harmony' (Arnold 1998). Huaren chapters have been formed mainly in Southeast Asian cities, but they are beginning to appear in all continents, and the federation anticipates a membership of ten million in a few years.

This 'revolution' in Chinese political activism is attributed to the fact that 'at least four million of us around the world are computer users, computer geeks and techies', according to an American Chinese attorney, Edward Liu, who heads the San Francisco chapter of Huaren. As reported on its website, this construction of a global Chinese public identifies race as the unifying feature. Tan maintains that the WHF is not intended to encourage Chinese chauvinism but 'to eradicate the intimidation which some governments are subjecting Chinese and other ethnic minorities to. We want to ensure that such atrocities will never happen again to anyone of any race and color.' He adds: 'Like any other race, the Chinese are expected to be responsible citizens in their country of birth or adoption.'[4] As a diaspora public set up by overseas Chinese professionals based in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the US, many of whom have no prior experience with or links to Indonesia, Global

3 At the 1998 Manila meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Madeline Albright, the American Secretary of State, condemned the Burmese state for its mistreatment of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, but she made no mention of the ongoing attacks on ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.

4 See <http://www.huaren.org> (downloaded 14 June 1999).

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Huaren seeks to act as a kind of disembedded and placeless political watchdog on behalf of the Chinese race.

Edward Liu, who spoke at a San Francisco rally, criticized President Habibie (President Suharto's successor) for being complicit in a *de facto* 'ethnic cleansing' of Chinese influence in the cultural, economic, and social fabric of Indonesia.[5] He thanked ethnic Indonesians such as Father Sandiawan Sumardi and other pribumi human rights advocates who risked their own safety and lives in support of the victims. He condemned the 'Chinese Indonesians' who were at one time cronies of Suharto but 'now have ingratiated themselves with Habibie in the same rotten system of corruption, cronyism and nepotism'. He went on to lecture the Indonesians:

> Chinese Indonesians have a right to be good Indonesians. They have a right to be Chinese culturally too. They have a right, as I do, as a Chinese American of Filipino background to be proud of my ties. I am proud to be a Chinese. I am also proud to be a Filipino. I am also proud to be a San Franciscan and an American.[6]

This speech demonstrates extreme insensitivity to the situation in Indonesia. Liu makes distinctions in racial terms, and seems to give primacy to Chineseness, when most ethnic Chinese prefer to refer to themselves as Indonesian Chinese, and not the reverse. Liu seems to essentialize the Chinese race and to conflate race with culture. He criticizes Habibie, who though politically weak had worked to improve the citizenship protections of ethnic minorities.

The diaspora politics protesting anti-Chinese activities around the world is cast in the language of moral redemption for the Huaren race, posing the need to balance racial protection against economic advantage. For instance, the World Huaren Federation was lauded by the *Straits Times* in Singapore which claimed:

> Previously, Chinese communities were more concerned with commercial and economic matters. The ethnic Chinese in Indonesia had been pummeled by rioting in the past decades – but they had always absorbed the punishment meekly to preserve their commercial interests. This time around, a landmark shift occurred with modern communications technology becoming the unifying force. (Soh 1998)

In on-line discussions on the Huaren website, the attacks on Indonesian Chinese have become a stimulus for a moral resurgence around the concept of a Chinese race. New American Chinese have logged on to confess their 'shame' for having failed 'to help Huaren refugee[s] in Vietnam and in Cambodia'. A subscriber urges his compatriots: 'Don't sell our pride and value for short-term personal and materialist gain. Wealth without pride and compassion is not success or achievement.' He bemoans the fact that wherever any Chinese was mentally or physically discriminated against, the majority of

5 The teach-in, organized by ICANET (Indonesian Chinese American Network), and sponsored by a San Francisco councilman Leland Yee – one of two American Chinese elected councilmen in America's largest enclave of American Chinese – was dramatized by the personal accounts of the Jakarta riots by three Indonesians of Chinese descent, who spoke anonymously, behind a screen, to protect them from potential retaliation by the dark forces within the Indonesian government. This event was reported on <http://www.huaren.org> (downloaded 14 June 1999).

6 See *San Francisco Chronicle* (1998). Reproduced on <http://www.huaren.org>

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the 'so called "successful" business Huaren' were nowhere to be seen.[7] A respondent notes that for the past two decades many Chinese emigrants were ashamed of China and Vietnam for being communist and poor countries, and their lack of sympathy to the Chinese boat people was influenced by the 'Western propaganda machine'. Now his own view has changed:

> How and when I realized that I was not just an internationalist (I was a parasite) but a human first and foremost, I can't pinpoint .... Being racial is not necessarily negative. Racial discrimination and persecution is obnoxious but it is necessary to contribute towards one's race. One is as whole as [what] one's ancestors [have] built in the past, and each man in the present must maintain and build for the descendants.... [The] Chinese must begin to let loose their embrace on self-gain .... the stronger must fend for the weaker, the more able to contribute more. This is something new to [us] Chinese and we must set the example.[8]

7 'JT': 'Our shame for failing to help Huaren refugee[s] in Vietnam and Cambodia in the past' <http://www.huaren.org> (downloaded 14 June 1999).

8 'Dennis': 'Re: Our shame for failing to help Huaren refugee[s] in Vietnam and Cambodia in the past' <http://www.huaren.org> (downloaded 14 June 1999).

The conflation of diaspora and transnationalism

This paper considers differentiations among migrant populations who share an ethnocultural or racial ancestry – a diverse assemblage of co-ethnics who have been conceptually reduced to homogeneous 'diasporic communities'. Popular books such as *Sons of the Yellow Emperor* or the *Encyclopedia of Chinese Overseas* seek to unite diverse flows of people in different parts of the world through their Chinese heritage and ancestral mainland origins (Pan 1990, 1999). In recent decades, as new flows of well-educated, middle-class Chinese from Asia have flocked to North America, there has been an intensification of Asian American interest in a search for cultural roots (see *Daedalus* 1991). The term 'diaspora' has suddenly begun to be invoked by activists and academics in order to claim an overarching framework for heterogeneous peoples who may be able to trace ancestral roots to China.[9] Conceptually speaking, 'diaspora' as widely used today refers not to permanent exile, but rather to the global imaginary invoked by transnational subjects located in metropolitan centers who wish to exercise a new form of power through the use of informational technology.

What is necessary, then, is to differentiate between the political use of the term 'diaspora' and the conceptual meaning of diaspora as exile. Many analytical perspectives however conflate diaspora as permanent exile with contemporary forms of fairly unrestricted mobility. The terms 'transnational migration' and 'diaspora' are often used in the same breath, confusing changes in population flows occasioned by globalizing market forces with earlier forms of permanent exile. While some migrations are involuntary or occasioned by war (hegira in Islamic countries), most cross-border flows today are induced and channeled by the ease of travel and the reorganization

9 On American campuses, ethnic studies, which originally framed the study of minorities within the American nation, began to be reoriented towards a study of 'diaspora' and of roots in the homelands of immigrants. This is in part a recognition of the transnational connections sustained by new immigrant populations, but also a re-articulation of ethnic claims in a global space.

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of labor markets within the global economy. For instance, the terms 'diasporic communities' and 'global ethnoscapes' have been used to refer to migrant communities that have an unprecedented effect on the politics of the homeland (Appadurai 1995). But the term 'diasporic communities' seems to suggest that migrant populations who have the potential of belonging to the same ethnic group are internally homogeneous, have similar imaginaries, and seek to affect state politics in the same way. The effect of this is to essentialize migrants as particular kinds of ethnics, when our task is rather to sort out the different categories of people who can be described as, for example, ethnic Chinese traveling abroad, but who are often in different class, gender, and labor circuits, and who form discrepant alliances and pursue divergent politics.

The term 'transnationality' better describes the variety of cultural interconnections and trans-border movements and networks which have intensified under conditions of late capitalism. Contemporary transnational flows may have overlapped with the paths of earlier migrants from the same country of departure who had left under involuntary conditions. When we think of Southeast Asians refugees in the United States, for instance, we might consider them part of a diaspora created by war and resettlement abroad. But a generation later, many of same refugees and their children are engaged in multiple home visits and cross-border exchanges. They are participating in contemporary movements of people back and forth, propelled by trade, labor markets, and tourism. Indeed, most original diaspora populations – initially occasioned by expulsion with no hope of return – now have the possibility of multiple returns and/or participation in global circuits formed by commerce. The ease of travel today means that few migrants are truly exiles, or experiencing diaspora in its original sense of a lack of hope of return to one's homeland. Diaspora sentiments may linger but it may be more analytically exact to use the term 'transnationalism' to describe the processes of disembedding from a set of localized relations in the homeland nation and re-embedding in new overlapping networks that cut across borders. It seems to me, therefore, that the old meaning of diaspora – of being scattered or in dispersion, with no hope of return – is too limiting an analytical concept to capture the multiplicity of vectors and agendas associated with the majority of contemporary border crossings.

As Zygmont Bauman reminds us, there is a polarization between those free to move and those forced to move, e.g., between travelers and refugees, businessmen and migrant workers. This 'global hierarchy of mobility' is part of a worldwide and local redistribution of privileges and deprivations; a restratification of humanity (Bauman 1998: 70). The scholarship of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia has been meticulous in analyzing this internal kind of fragmentation and cultural diversity within seemingly unified diaspora populations, but such works remain largely unfamiliar to contemporary

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diaspora studies.[10] More recently, *Ungrounded Empires* brought together interdisciplinary analyses of diverse ethnic Chinese flows and transnational subjectivity emerging within situations of 'flexible' capitalism in the Asia Pacific (Ong and Nonini 1997). This volume, among others, has influenced China historians to turn to the study of the Chinese diaspora (heretofore considered a residual phenomenon) and, as mentioned, has opened up Asian American Studies to a whole new field of investigation. One important work documenting unexpected circuits and cultural complexity is Adam McKeown's *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii 1900–1936* (1999). Nevertheless, despite such studies of multiple trajectories and ambiguity in identity, there is still a dearth of scholarly attention focusing on these tensions between translation networks and local ethnic situations in particular locations. Clearly, one needs to differentiate between diaspora as a set of differentiated phenomena and diaspora as political rhetoric.

Thus, I would consider discourses of diaspora not as descriptions of already formed social entities, but rather as specific political practices projected on a global scale. Ironically, then, diaspora politics describe not an already existing social phenomenon, but rather a social category called into being by newly empowered transnational subjects. The contemporary transnationalization of ethnic groups has engendered a yearning for a new kind of global ethnic identification. The proliferation of discourses of diaspora is part of a political project which aims to weave together diverse populations who can be ethnicized as a single worldwide entity. In other words, diaspora becomes the framing device for contemporary forms of mass customization of global ethnic identities. Aided by electronic technology, the assembly of a variety of co-ethnic groups under an electronic umbrella thus disembeds ethnic formation from particular milieus of social life. Indeed, as the above Indonesian incidents and Global Huaren have shown, information technologies play a big role in engendering and channeling desires for a grand unifying project of global ethnicity that flies in the face of the diversity of peoples and experiences. As we shall see, 'Chinese' peoples from around the world are among the most diverse of the populations that have been lumped into a single category.

10 The literature is too extensive to be listed here. Skinner (1957) is just one classic study of the stratifications and cultural diversity within emigrant Chinese populations in Southeast Asia.

Contemporary flows of overseas Chinese

There are approximately fifty million people of Chinese ancestry living outside China, and they are dispersed in 135 countries. Analysts and activists have often referred to this linguistically and culturally heterogeneous population as a single diaspora community, even though it has been built up over centuries of countless flows – first of exiles, then of migrants – out of the Chinese mainland. Most of the flows from China stemmed from the late

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nineteenth century, when British incursions, the disruptions of agriculture and trade, and the resulting famines generated the great south Chinese exodus to Southeast Asia, North and South America. Previously, I have used the phrase 'modern Chinese transnationalism' to describe the re-emigration of overseas Chinese subjects who have settled in postcolonial Southeast Asian countries to North America and other continents.[11] The 1965 family unification law allowed the children of earlier waves of Chinese immigrants to join their parents in the United States. In the early 1980s, new waves of ethnic Chinese flocked into Canada, Australia and the United States. In some cases, these were students seeking higher education; in others, families seeking resettlement abroad before the 1998 return of Hong Kong to China rule. Economic affluence in Southeast Asian countries and in Taiwan also encouraged business migrants and professionals to pursue opportunities in the West. At the same time, events in China opened up opportunities for outmigration. These outflows from the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan have been diverse, in some cases more remarkable for their differences than for their similarities.

11 For this historically informed, multi-sited view, see Ong and Nonini (1997).

Since the late 1980s, most ethnic Chinese immigrants to North America have been from China (as opposed to ethnic Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong). China's opening to the global economy, the impending return of Hong Kong to China rule, and the Tiananmen Square crackdown were major causes for an outflow of students, business people, professionals and ordinary workers seeking political refuge or economic opportunities in the West. Plunging into the market is referred to as diving into the ocean (*xiahai*), and many ambitious Chinese link expanded business and professional activities with seeking opportunities abroad. Legally, 40,000 leave for the US, Canada, and Australia each year. Currently migrants from China are of a higher professional and economic status than earlier ones in the 1980s, and the perception is that the US embassy is raising the bar for skilled immigrants from China, creating fierce competition among Chinese urban elites to enter the United States by making business investments, using family connections, applying to college or contracting bogus marriages with American citizens. The other major category of mainland Chinese emigrants is that of illegal migrants, mainly from the southern province of Fujian, who seek entry into the United States and Canada. Many end up as exploited restaurant and sweatshop workers (Kwong 1997).

Thus the people with Chinese ancestry in North America include citizens from China and overseas Chinese from a dozen other countries in which their ancestors had settled. Such immigrants do not see themselves as a unity since they have different national origins, cultures, languages, and political and economic agendas. They do not necessarily associate with, or view themselves as having any continuity with, earlier waves of immigrants from the mainland. Indeed, the range of nationality, ethnicity, language, and class origins

among Chinese immigrants is vast and unstable, splitting and recombining in new ways. For instance, in Vancouver, affluent Hong Kong emigrants are very insistent in setting themselves apart as 'high-quality people' from poor Chinese illegals smuggled in shipping containers (Ong, forthcoming (a)). In the United States, even among the recent waves of immigrants from China and Taiwan, great distinctions in terms of class, dialect, and region are brought by the newcomers to the new country. Such divisions are only one example of how one cannot assume a unified diaspora community constituted by people who may be construed as belonging to the same ethnic grouping or hailing from the same homeland. There is great diversity among peoples who may be able to claim Chinese ancestry, and they may or may not use diaspora-like notions in shaping their public interests or political goals. I therefore suggest that, instead of talking about given identities, it may be more fruitful to attend to the variety of publics where specific interests intersect and are given particular formulations.

Translocal publics among new Chinese immigrants

Given its currency in the age of transnationalism and multiculturalism, 'diaspora' should not be considered as an objective category, but rather treated as an ethnographic term of self-description by different immigrant groups or publics. More and more, diaspora becomes an emotional and ideologically-loaded term that is invoked by disparate transnational groups as a way to construct broad ethnic coalitions that cut across national spaces. Previously, I have used the term 'translocal publics' to describe the new kinds of borderless ethnic identifications enabled by technologies and forums of opinion-making. These publics play a strategic role in shaping new ethnicizing and cultural discourses for audiences scattered around the world.[12] Here, I identify three kinds of milieus that have different potential in shaping transnational ethnic Chinese fields of political action.

12 I explore three different kinds of Chinese-identified translocal publics, linked by international Chinese media audiences, networks of ethnic Chinese professionals, and business circles located mainly in Southeast Asia (Ong 1999: 139–84).

Diaspora as an extension of the motherland

One can identify a 'Chinese' public that sees itself as an extension of the homeland and as sharing a continuity with earlier waves of Chinese patriots who possessed the conviction that the experience and status of Chinese abroad was a direct result of the status of China within the international system.

> If Chinese people were bullied locally, that was because China received no respect internationally. To be Chinese, anywhere in the world, was to be a representative

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> of the motherland, to have a stake in the future of China, and to recognize the claims of China and Chinese culture over their loyalty. (Williams 1960: 128)

Today, Chinese who see themselves as an extension of territorial nationalism are primarily new migrants from the Chinese mainland whom the Chinese government calls *haiwai huaren* ('Chinese abroad'). They may be living and working in the United States, but their hearts and politics are tied to the interests of the Chinese nation (Tu 1991; Liu 1999). One can say that there is one transnational public that takes mainland China as its frame of reference, another transnational public which is an extension of Taiwanese nationalism, and also a Hong Kong network. These different publics may overlap at the margins, but their orientations are towards politics and social relations with the home country.

Translational identities of Southeast Asian immigrants

Southeast Asian immigrants with some kind of Chinese ancestry do not fall naturally under the category of *haiwai huaren* (or the older term of *huaqiao*), although in their re-migration to North America some conditions exist for re-Sinicization, as I discuss below. Ethnic Chinese whose departures from Southeast Asia have been historically shaped by earlier migrations out of China (since the early sixteenth century), European colonialism, postcolonial nationalist ideologies and globalization tend to stress their nationality rather than their ethnic status. Under colonialism, creolized and mixed-race communities – called Straits Chinese in Malaya, mestizos in the Philippines, and Peranakans in the Dutch East Indies – flourished. But in almost all of postcolonial Southeast Asia, a series of native, colonial and/or postcolonial government actions have integrated different kinds of Chinese immigrant communities as ethnic minorities (Malaysia), as an ethnically marked shopkeeping class (Thailand), or through policies of erasing the stigma of Chinese ethnicity which both encouraged and compelled these immigrants to pass into the dominant native community through intermarriage and the adoption of dominant languages and cultural practices (in degrees of severity: Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia). Thus people refer to themselves as Malaysian Chinese, not Chinese Malaysians. Among ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, the Philippines, or Thailand, the Chinese ancestry is often eclipsed or uninscribed by name, language, and cultural practices because of forcible state integration of these minorities. In countries where religion has not played a major role of assimilation, people with Chinese ancestry have become part of the ruling class. In all countries but Singapore, where a majority of the population is of Chinese ancestry, Chinese ethnicity is politically underplayed because of the state emphasis on majority

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rule. Thus such differences in group identity and relationships to nationalism make for extremely complex assemblages of ethnic, cultural, and national identity among overseas Chinese. After a few centuries of migration and settlement, Southeast Asian peoples who can trace Chinese ancestry think of their identities as produced out of a cultural syncretism which is associated with westernized middle-class attributes and cosmopolitanism, although there has been a revitalization of ethnic Chinese connections to China since the 1980s. But in Southeast Asian countries, any political suggestion of diaspora sentiments is avoided, for it implies disloyalty and lack of patriotism to the country of settlement.

When Southeast Asian Chinese subjects re-migrate to North America (and elsewhere in the West), they tend to identify themselves in terms of their home nationalities, and call themselves Thai, Cambodian, and Filipino American. Ethnic Chinese from these diasporas may be highly conscious of the fluidity of identity formation in the shifting field of modern geopolitics, and are more likely to resist the hegemonic discourses of political nationalism among those immigrant Chinese who closely identify with China and Taiwan. Because they are relatively small in number and have come from different Southeast Asian countries, overseas Chinese from Southeast Asia, and especially Indonesia, have not yet come together in a self-conscious production of an all-inclusive ethnicity.[13] Indeed, many of them would fit Stuart Hall's notion of translated identity, seeing themselves as the product of a rich confluence of traditions, histories, and cultures (Hall 1996). For instance, Southeast Asian immigrants participate simultaneously in various media publics – from homeland print cultures to Chinese kung fu movies – in sharp contrast to people from the Chinese mainland who rarely express interest in other Asian cultural spheres.

13 Policy-makers have stuck the label Southeast Asian American on all immigrants from mainland Southeast Asia. It has come to be an all-inclusive ethnic category for links to major institutions and for gaining access to resources. However, deep cultural, ethnic, and national differences persist among the variety of peoples from the region. See Ong (forthcoming (b)).

Ethnic absolutism in the cyber age

For the disparate groups of immigrants who can claim Chinese ancestry, the whole issue of a broader, collective Chinese ethnicity emerges in multicultural America: should they identify more strongly with their new nationality, their old one, or with a potentially resurgent ethnicity driven by ambitious Asian Americans?

I argue that the translocal publics constituted by professionals on-line are now directly engaged in the production of global ethnicities. Specifically, economic globalization has scattered a new kind of transnational Chinese professional (managers, entrepreneurs, engineers, programmers) throughout the world. Over the past two decades, alongside Chinese business migrants, tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese professionals from Southeast Asia and China have moved abroad to global cities while maintaining family, economic, and professional links with their home countries. These expatriate Chinese

professionals have formed middle-class Asian neighborhoods in cities such as Sydney, Vancouver, San Francisco, New York, Washington, London, and Paris, and are beginning to think of their Chinese identity in global terms. In North America, the concentration of ethnic Chinese professionals in particular cities (Sunnyvale), neighborhoods and high-level corporate occupations has produced conditions for a diversity of people who claim ethnic Chinese ancestry to become re-Sinicized through the universalizing forces of cyberpower, and through discourses of human rights and citizenship.

Asian immigrants – professionals, managers, entrepreneurs, and venture capitalists – are powerful members of the American corporate world.[14] In Silicon Valley, a majority of the foreign-born engineers are from Asia, mainly Taiwan and India. Besides their technical skills and wealth, these new immigrants 'have created a rich fabric of professional and associational activities that facilitate immigrant job search, information exchange, access to capital and managerial know-how, and the creation of shared ethnic resources' (Saxenian 1999). They maintain professional and business links with cities in Asia, fostering two-way flows of capital, skills, and information between California and Taipei. The very economic clout of such transnational Asian professional communities is, however, undercut by their invisibility in North American cultural and political life. They do not share the histories of earlier waves of immigration from Asia, but constitute a globalized yet politically amorphous collection of ethnicized professionals, incompletely disembedded from their original homelands but playing a dominant role in international commerce and industry. They exist in a social vacuum, and the imbalance between professional power and political-cultural weakness creates conditions that seem ripe for the emergence of what Stuart Hall calls 'ethnic absolutism'. What can they turn to that will allow a kind of re-territorializing – a way of tracking back to those far-flung and myriad ethnic Chinese communities in Asia – which can help 'restore coherence, "closure", and Tradition' in the face of political displacement, cultural diversity, and existentialist uncertainty (Hall 1996: 630)?

14 For a discussion of various Asian populations in the Silicon Valley economy, see Ong (forthcoming (c)).

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Cyber Huaren: the vicarious politics of electronic intervention

We can now return to the opening scenes of the paper: why do a group of high-tech ethnic Chinese from disparate places intervene in the 1998 anti-Chinese attacks in Indonesia? How has the Internet allowed for a simplification of identities, such as 'Chinese people in diaspora'? What are the positive and negative effects of rapid Internet interventions on the political sovereignties and the situated realities of peoples in distant lands?

The distinctive practices of international business – space-annihilating technologies, digitalized information, the flexible recombinations of different

elements – provide a strategy for producing a unified ethnicity that is seemingly borderless. The Internet, Saskia Sassen has noted, is a powerful electronic technology that 'is partly embedded in actual societal structures and power dynamics: its topography weaves in and out of non-electronic space' (Sassen 1999: 62). At the same time, the rise of digitalized publics means that people with limited access to the Internet are less powerful in affecting distant events than those connected to websites.[15] Privileged émigrés who control the electronic network to shape diaspora politics seek to subvert and bypass the sovereign power of nation-states, but are they able to control the effects of their rapid-fire interventions? What are the consequences when diaspora is invoked to assert an ethnic solidity and to deploy human rights discourses, thus framing particular conflicts and problems in terms of global racial identity? As we shall see, such rapid and remote electronic responses to localized conflicts can backfire against the very people, situated outside electronic space, that they were intended to help.

15 This observation borrows from the insights of Massey (1993).

Following the international uproar over the anti-Chinese attacks, and appeals by various NGOs in Indonesia, President Habibie quickly tried to reassert state control and to revise legal discriminations against ethnic Chinese minorities. In early October, 1998, he announced a decree that would require all government bodies to provide equal treatment and service to all Indonesians. A new law also seeks to revise all policies and laws that are discriminatory 'in all forms, character and ranks based on ethnicity, religion, race, or family records' (Coppel 1999). The terms 'pribumi' and 'non-pribumi' were to be discontinued in all government offices and activities. This news was greeted by Huaren spokesman Edward Liu with an invective about official 'doublespeak' and an assertion that global Huarens should react with 'a great deal of skepticism and sarcasm'.

> If true, this is indeed a small stride in the right direction … if this is merely a political placebo – empty rhetoric camouflaging a sinister, bad-faith … public relations attempt to stem the flight of Chinese Indonesian human and capital … and sanitize the bad image of Indonesia as a lawless, racist society – then we are afraid the downward spiraling of Indonesia will continue.[16]

16 <http://www.huaren.org> (downloaded 8 October 1998).

Liu goes on to warn that in 'an increasingly globalized and digit[al]ized world, Indonesia can least afford to expunge and erase ten million of its most productive and resourceful citizens of Chinese descent.… The eyes of the Global Huaren are fixed on Indonesia.' This language of the multinational diaspora subject is shunned by people who consider themselves fundamentally – culturally, socially, legally, and politically – Indonesian. By creating invidious essential difference between races, the diaspora discourse reinforces the alien status of Indonesian Chinese who for long have suffered under the dual citizenship policy of Suharto.

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What happens when electronic messages from a cyber community are received in sites of political struggle on the ground? On the one hand, we can applaud the role of Global Huaren for its timely mobilization of protests around the world which has been effective in casting a strong spotlight on the Indonesian atrocities, compelling Habibie to take action protecting minorities. On the other hand, some of the tactics of Global Huaren have misfired and jeopardized efforts to rebuild trust between Indonesian Chinese and the pribumis after the crisis.

The Huaren website has carried repeated stories and pictures, including bogus ones, of ongoing rapes. For instance, in mid-1998 the Huaren website circulated a picture, later found to be false, that depicted an Asian-looking rape victim in a shower-stall. This stirred anger in Indonesia. Another Internet account reported that a woman claimed her rapists invoked the name of Islam. The story went on to note that since the era before the coming of Islam 'the act of raping women has been assumed to be the most effective way to conquer races'. Despite controversy surrounding the truth of this story and these claims, rumors were produced about a Serbian-style masterplan to drive the Chinese out of Indonesia through an ethnic-cleansing operation (Sim 1998).

Indeed, to Indonesian Chinese who fled the country and to many overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, the attacks might have seemed like the result of a policy of ethnic cleansing.[17] But we have to be wary about making such strong charges, since, after all, a government-sponsored team traced the rapes of minority women to a special branch of the Indonesian army (Kopassus) headed by Suharto's son-in-law, then lieutenant-general Prabowo Subianto. In other words, the attacks on minority women were limited to a renegade faction of Suharto's army, and were not the result of official government policy.[18] There is no evidence that the Indonesian public had been engaged in a campaign to oust Indonesian Chinese. Overseas accusations of ethnic cleansing have been adamantly rejected by Indonesian leaders such as President Habibie and General Wiranto. Furthermore, Abdulrahman Wahid of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, the 35 million strong Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and another leader, Amien Rais, went on record to condemn whatever rapes had occurred, and to express their fear that such Internet-fueled rumors could sharpen racial and religious polarizations.[19] Furthermore, disagreements surrounded the reports of the actual number of rape cases.[20] The public, including many pribumi-operated NGOs, seem more likely to believe that the army was directly involved in all kinds of abuses, partly to displace the rage in the streets against the government onto Chinese and other minorities. While these questions will probably never be fully resolved, the Indonesian Chinese who have not fled the country reject the tendency of overseas Chinese to blame *all* of Indonesia for the violence, as well as their talk about ethnic cleansing. Attempts to consider Chinese people

17 Tens of thousands of Indonesian Chinese fled to surrounding countries. Some decided to settle in Perth, Australia, but many stayed with relatives or in hotels in Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Thailand. The wealthy ones have since settled abroad, while others have returned permanently to Indonesia, their homeland and source of livelihood.

18 Prabowo was also involved in the disappearance of twenty-four activists earlier in the year. See reports in the *Jakarta Post* (14 July 1998) and APS (21 December 1998).

19 In 1999, Wahid succeeded Habibie as President.

20 There is still disagreement as to whether there were eighty-five (verified) cases of rape during the riots, or 168, as many NGOs claim. Twenty of the rape victims subsequently died. See <http://members.xoom.com/>

in the world as a diaspora race distinct from their citizenship in particular countries may jeopardize the post-crisis efforts of Indonesian Chinese to rebuild their society within the context of a broad-based coalition to fight for human rights within Indonesia.

Embedded citizenship versus cyber-based race

The horrendous events of 1998 have convinced more Indonesian Chinese to participate in human rights activities that serve a variety of marginalized groups. Three national commissions – on human rights, women, and children – are building a coalition around issues of anti-militarism and citizenship based in international law. Feminist NGOs formed a national commission on Violence Against Women (VAW) in the aftermath of the army-instigated rapes of minority women in Java and throughout the archipelago.[21] The Urban Poor Consortium has been fighting for the rights of the unemployed and the homeless. The Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras) is urging support for an international tribunal to investigate reports of military collusion in the killing of East Timorese, despite the strong objections of the Indonesian state. Other groups include CARI (Committee Against Racism in Indonesia), which is combating racism and pressuring the Indonesian government to stop the systematic killing in parts of Indonesia (Aceh, Ambon, West Timor, and Irian).

In contrast to Global Huaren, Indonesian Chinese using the Internet to mobilize global support have stressed their sense of embedded citizenship in Indonesia. We can say that such counter-webs seek global support for Indonesians in general, and not exclusively for ethnic Chinese, as is the case with Global Huaren. There are multiple websites set up by Indonesian groups, and their messages focus on the suffering of a range of victims. A website called 'Indo-Chaos' operates in both Bahasa Indonesia and in English, and is directly connected with the United Front for Human Rights in Indonesia.[22] It commemorates the Indonesian Chinese victims of sexual violence, but also deplores the Indonesian army-instigated violence against other ethnic groups in Aceh and East Timor. An NGO called Volunteers for Humanitarian Causes notes that, altogether, 1,190 people were killed in Jakarta alone.[23] Yet another website set up by Indonesians stresses the status of the victims not as Chinese but as Indonesian citizens, and appeals for help in their campaign 'against human rights violations, injustice, and racism'.[24] A leader of CARI, the anti-racism group, noted that humanitarian interventions should be careful to avoid inadvertently inflaming the entire population:

> The responses of the Chinese communities in Australia and the West to the May Tragedy were obviously overwhelming and to large degree welcomed by the

21 For a UN fact-finding report on the May 1998 rapes of minority ethnic women in Java, Sumatra, and East Timor, see Coomaraswamy (1999).

22 <http://members.xoom.com/Xoom/perkosan/main_menu.html>

23 See <http://members.xoom.com> (downloaded 25 March 1999).

24 See <http://www.geocities.com/Soho/Atrium/5140> (email message from soc@indonesia, 10 August 1998).

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> Chinese in Indonesia. It is always good to know that the International communities, including governments, defended the Indonesian Chinese rights and condemned Indonesian government for their failure to protect their citizens. The problem with these protests was associated with the way some of the demonstrators expressed their anger. Some of them used anti-Indonesia expressions and burnt Indonesian flags. Some even ridiculed Islam religion. Such attitudes … prompt reactions which further jeopardize the positions of the Indonesian Chinese in Indonesia. We need to urge the International communities to direct their protests to the Indonesian government and military forces, not the people in general. We should avoid actions which induce racial or religious conflicts at all costs.

This statement is not only an expression of the importance of a non-racial approach to humanitarian intervention; it is also a plea for the international community to recognize and respect the embedded citizenship of the majority of Indonesian Chinese who have chosen to remain. Indonesian Chinese have much work to do to re-imagine Indonesian citizenship by repairing their damaged image and reassessing their own relations with the government and with their fellow Indonesians. Besides forming a political party and many associations to fight racism and discrimination, they have lobbied the government to erase all forms of official discrimination. As mentioned above, the government recently banned all forms of discrimination on the basis of distinctions between pribumi and non-pribumi. Indonesian Chinese are now working to induce the government to re-categorize ethnic Chinese from the stigmatizing label 'Indonesian citizens of alien Chinese descent' (*warga negara asing/keturunan Cina*) into the category of 'ethnic groups' (*suku bangsa*) which they would occupy alongside hundreds of other ethnic groups in the country.[25] Ethnic Chinese groups have reached out to pribumis in a process of 'native' empowerment through the construction of a people's economy (*perekonomian rakyat*). Some have given their support to an affirmative action program to channel economic and social resources towards the uplift of the indigenous majority. Thus what Indonesian Chinese do not need is to allow themselves to become part of an ethnicizing transnational public.

25 Coppel (1999). The dual categories of citizenship – which treat ethnic Chinese (citizens of foreign descent) as categorically different from indigenous Indonesians – date from the Dutch colonial era.

The promise and the risk of cyberpublics

'We live in a world of "overlapping communities of fate"', David Held and others have said,

> where the trajectories of each and every country are more tightly intertwined than ever before …. In a world where [powerful states make decisions not just for their own people but for others as well, and] transnational actors and forces cut across the boundaries of national communities in diverse ways, the questions of who

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> should be accountable to whom, and on what basis, do not easily resolve themselves. (Held *et al.* 1999: 81)

Translocal publics can indeed challenge the sovereignty of nations and can have humanitarian effects, bringing international opinion to bear on the mistreatment of a nation's citizens. International interventions, for instance, have stopped bloodletting in some conflicts (in East Timor, for example). Cyberpublics based on nation or religion, such as the Falun Gong movement that emerged in China, can constitute a community of fate that evades state oppression, exposes injustice, and turns a global gaze on a state's shameful behavior. Cyberpublics thus can put pressure on governments to be accountable to their own citizens, as well as to the global community.

But cyber communities of shared fate may also inspire in their members an unjustified sense that an electronic-based humanitarian intervention will invariably produce positive effects. The actions of Global Huaren have demonstrated both the promise and the risk of romantic appeals to autonomy and citizenship beyond the reach of the state, illustrating the potentially explosive danger of the vicarious politics of diaspora. A resurgent Chinese cyber-identity based on moral high ground may be welcomed in Beijing (though not always), but is not necessarily welcomed by ethnic Chinese minorities elsewhere. The cyber-based articulation of a disembedded global racial citizenship can create invidious essential differences between ethnic others and natives, thus deepening rather than reducing already existing political and social divisions within particular nations. The loyalty of local citizens becomes suspect when they are linked by race to global electronic patrons. Rapid-fire Internet interventions, unaccompanied by a sophisticated understanding of specific situations in different countries, may very well jeopardize localized struggles for national belonging and an embedded concept of citizenship.

As I have argued, transnational populations now have the technological means to express their desire for an inclusive global ethnicity that can claim representation for a multitude of others, both on and off website systems, bringing them under an electronic umbrella of diaspora. By proclaiming itself a cyber watchdog, Global Huaren poses the question of accountability in an even more problematic and elusive fashion. What are the stakes of a cyber-based racial community for diverse social groupings (with and without such global web-postings) around the world? Furthermore, Internet discourses of a racialized diaspora cannot make up for the sheer anonymity of the members, clients, and other participants who can log in randomly from anywhere at any time. Websites allow a 'false' amplification of the power of a few individuals who can proliferate at hurricane-speed, unsubstantiated claims about racial interest and fate. A video-game logic can create instantaneous simplifications of good global activists versus bad governments,

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racial oppressors versus victims, contributing to rumors that might fuel a chain of violent events. Thus an instantaneous citizenship which can be activated by a keystroke has notoriously uncontrollable effects, putting into play disparate information and actors, thus exponentially confusing and conflating the stakes of particular conflicts and struggles.

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