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Forms and Fragments: Enactment of Cultural Identification in an Online Community of Chinese Living Overseas

Haibin Dong

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Haibin Dong

Candidate

Communication & Journalism

Department

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Ilia Rodriguez, Chairperson

Dr. John Condone

Dr. John Hood

Dr. Janet Cramer

**FORMS AND FRAGMENTS: ENACTMENT OF
CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION IN AN ONLINE COMMUNITY
OF CHINESE LIVING OVERSEAS**

By

HAIBIN DONG

B.A., English Literature, Northwest University, 1994
M.I.M., Business College, University of St. Thomas, 2004

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy
Communication**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

July, 2011

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my wife and our families (including our parents), who have been struggling together with me in fulfilling this endeavor, and all the COOCs who inspire me over the years...

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I have to express my wholehearted thankfulness to my dissertation adviser and committee chair, Dr. Iliá Rodríguez, who adopted me and salvaged me from the seemingly impossible academic quandary, for her immense understanding, uncompromising support, and dedicating scholarship of a true scholar. I took liberty writing this long sentence because I know, Iliá, you would not have to cut it short.

Along this line, Drs. and Professors John Condone, Jane Hood, and Janet Cramer, the solid legion of my committee, have been supporting this study and my own cultural survival in the States by their mega wisdoms and tycoon visions and ninja tolerance. Their contributions to this project are beyond the range of any reasonable payback.

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Ph.D., Communication & Journalism, University of New Mexico, 2011

ABSTRACT

This research is an interpretive study of the dynamics of cultural identification as enacted by Chinese individuals living overseas who participate in a virtual online community known as Wenxuecity.com. The study draws on intercultural communication theories of identity proposed by Carbaugh, Collier, and Hecht, as well as on my own integrative framework for the analysis of cultural identity, to explore the self-other interaction in identity enactment, the multidimensionality of identity, and the centrality of communication in processes of identification. Through the application of a qualitative analysis of online discourse, I found three primary forms of cultural identification – perceptual, strategic, and positional cultural identification – that reveal how online commentators make sense of their individual and group identities. Through online discussion of a variety of topics – from China’s history, East-West tensions, to academic power structures and racial hierarchies in host cultures or media stereotyping and global hegemonic relations – and using

communicative strategies like self-other comparison, advice, and ideological debate, commentators enact both a sense of group cohesiveness as well as their internal, conflictive heterogeneity. Their discourse allows for the exploration of how multiple dimensions of identity – individuality, sociality, materiality, and spirituality – intersect to shape the fragmentary character of cultural identification. In the particular case of the group under study, the dominant trends observed reveal that cultural identification is a process characterized by the enactment of a sense of marginalization in host societies, heightened individuality, strategic attachment to or distancing from Chinese cultural membership, and ideological divisions.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“After losing a land and then giving up a tongue,
we stopped talking of grief.
Smiles began to brighten our faces.
We laugh a lot, at our own mess.
Things become so beautiful,
even hailstones in the strawberry fields.”
Ha Jin, *Ways of Talking*

“Who am I?” is a question pondered perhaps more frequently by people who reside, on indefinite terms, in a place where they feel out of place. Afraid of being singled out and ruled out, they strive to accommodate themselves to the host culture by learning and complying with the norms of the immediate social milieu. Like deaf-mutes, they might stumble into miscommunication caused by a shifting common ground and a different understanding of common sense. While both enduring and enjoying the dynamics of intercultural encounters, they learn how to position and accept themselves, calculating gains and losses for their livelihoods. Beyond immediate social contact with their families, peers, employers, neighbors, and acquaintances in the adoptive cultures, they also partake of interactions in the world of media, often joining online virtual communities to exchange experiences, share information, express opinions with members of their own cultures. In interaction through media messages, members of these virtual communities often experience the disheartenment caused by ideological conflict, the perplexity caused by stereotypes and controversial social issues, embarrassment related to historical accounts of national disgrace, and affective responses to notions of self and other. Thus, virtual communities can become spaces to perform the multiple dimensions of identity—

from individual to social, material or spiritual dimensions-through communicative interaction.

The current research project explores the complexity of cultural identity and processes of identification as manifested through textual messages posted by Chinese overseas online commentators (hereafter COOCs), who are mostly from mainland China and participate in the cyber-ethnic space created by Wenxuecity.com. Because of the diverse social contexts of COOCs and their internal differences, the data collected from interactive message boards suggest a kaleidoscopic scene in which multiple dimensions of Chinese cultural identity are performed. The study of such intra-cultural complexity allows for a critical examination of cultural identification processes. Through an interpretive approach, the systematic study of these cyber voices—that outside the virtual ethnic enclave are faintly heard—is also an attempt to let those voices be heard as rich and relevant subjects for the study of identity and intercultural communication.

With increased mobility of individuals and groups beyond national boundaries in the last few decades, peoples in the diaspora have more alternative and convenient means to connect with one another across the globe (Mitra, 2005). The instantaneous, mediate access to world facilitated by the Internet (Mitra, 2005) helps the world's netizens find and define their groups. In an era of Internet bubbles, COOCs are representative of Chinese sojourners in the West who coincide in the virtual world to interact with members of their ingroup of Chinese individuals living outside China.

The current study deals online messages produced by COOCs to grasp the contemporary manifestation of the group's cultural identification in a global, cyber-spatial context.

Once relocated in multicultural settings outside China, COOCs are likely to engage in the interpretation of the ways in which China and its people and culture are viewed by others. As they do so, they also engage the discussion of their own conflicting and shared understandings of self-other. Both processes provide important insights for the study of how they negotiate a sense of identity in host cultures. With the focus on the complexity of Chinese identity enactment in intercultural, mediated contexts, I intend to examine three central questions: How do Chinese individuals living overseas use online communication to construct a sense of identity in the context of intercultural interaction?; What does online discourse reveal about the dynamics of cultural identification among the Chinese in the diaspora?; What does online communication reveal about the complex interrelation among dimensions of identity in cultural performance?

In the present study, the data were selected from readers' public commentaries in reaction to news and opinion pieces from various media sources that were posted on the homepage of Wenxuecity.com, a website headquartered in northern California in the United States. The news and opinion pieces posted online are re-edited and posted, along with blog entries, by website editors. The content covered current global and local events, particularly those related to China. The sources of news vary—from

Western print and broadcast media to the Chinese official newspaper—and people’s reactions to the stories are diverse. For instance, highly controversial and ideologically-loaded news reports often led to emotional and critical responses that contained traces of multiple positions of identification.

Cultural identity is a central concept in this study of the complex subjectivities and identifications among Chinese overseas. With emphasis on the pivotal connection of individual subjectivity to multicultural interaction, the concept of cultural identity has been widely applied in the analysis of cross-cultural and intercultural issues in global, multicultural, and post-colonial contexts (Carter, 2005; Friedman, 1994; Hall, 1996b; Parvis, 2006; Powell, 1999; Wilson & Dissanayake, 1996). Cultural identity is defined here as one's self-concept formed and performed in communication that emphasizes one's connection to cultural membership. Cultural identification is the enactment of cultural identity. More specifically, this study draws on theories of cultural identity developed in intercultural communication by Carbaugh (1988), Collier (1989), and Hecht (1993) to explore how individual subjectivities in the context of intercultural interaction through online media manifest processes of identity formation through communication. I am particularly interested in exploring how individuals in the virtual community examined perceive themselves in the world and connect with one another to affirm a sense of identity in an ethnic quarter in the global cyberspace.

Relatively fixed but always fluid in one’s life, the various realities that help

form one's sense of self shape the core dimensions of identity – individuality, sociality, materiality, and spirituality (Dong, 2008, 2009, & 2011). In identity formation, one's belonging to or position in some particular group is welded with one's connection to ideological preferences, peculiar body-mind consciousness, and reaction to one's material conditions. The constitution of identity is also the result of long-term cultural socialization that fuels and drives the individual's perception and interpretation of the outer world. On the other hand, due to the dynamic nature of cultural identification (Carbaugh, 1994; Hecht, 1993 & 2005), the textural quality of identity may also change as a result of constant social construction (Carbaugh, 1994). In the short run, the changes may be superficial and fluid. But in the long run, they might substantiate one's cultural identification and become sources of profound change in the matrix of an individual cultural identity. For the purpose of this research, the complexity and dynamic characteristics of cultural identity will be conceptualized as a prism to discern people's identification practices embedded in online messages that react to various media stories as well as to COOCs postings. Through this prismatic lens, one can view the diversity within cultural identity in a holistic way.

Media and Identity: Reflections and Considerations

Like millions of first-generation Chinese overseas, I live in a foreign land as a sojourner in pursuit of personal achievement and success. Over the years, some changes have occurred to my self-perception. These changes are profound and have influenced my personal growth and reinforced my ambition to become competent in

intercultural communication. The most important aspect of these changes is related to my cultural identity. Back in my home country, I worked as an international program coordinator in a large state university and had encountered thousands of people from other countries who were “foreigners” as I am now in the United States. They were tourists, students, scholars, administrators, professional diplomats, entrepreneurs, missionaries, and/or adoptive parents on tour with their adopted Chinese-looking children. At that time, I took my cultural/ethnic/national identity for granted and never questioned them. I was seldom bothered with the image of who I might be as a Chinese in the eyes of those foreign beholders at home, where I was the respected Chinese who was able to speak English and communicate with them fairly well. Actually, I felt being liked by most of them.

Outside China, I suddenly merged into an environment where my Chinese identity became salient in contrast to the new natural, human, and social context. Although I may be conscious of my Chinese-ness daily in interpersonal encounters, what has struck me the most and made me realize my cultural difference were the diverse images and discourses produced by the media world about China and its culture. A media world that, free of Chinese government’s censorship, is loaded with biases in tune with the dominant ideologies in the host culture. In this media world where free speech is valued and institutionalized, I hear voices from vastly different perspectives. I can access the world of Western media and become aware of messages with criticism against China and anything Chinese like Chinese products, human right

situations, animal right abuses, the struggles for a “Free Tibet,” and the “notorious” Beijing Olympic Torch Relay. With access to a free press, I can read many Chinese dissident publications and even participate in some political activities that would be banned in China.

My reactions to this sudden change of media environment are complicated, fluid, and hard to explain even by myself. One thing is certain, my sometimes presumptuous and even naïve assumptions of my Chinese identity are giving way to a more realistic assessment of what it means to be a contemporary Chinese in global, multicultural contexts and how Chinese culture is viewed by people outside China, including Chinese expatriates and exiles. Now I can be more coolheaded about the complexity of my cultural identity, I could say that I am no longer so jittery or defensive toward any unfriendly treatment based on Western xenophobic or Sinophobe (abhorrence of China and Chinese) sentiments. Thus, although the awareness of one’s cultural difference can be frustrating, embarrassing, and even hurtful, it can also make one more realistic, mature, and shrewd regarding all sorts of situation one has to confront.

In this new media environment, the Internet is playing an unprecedented role. Although people still describe the Internet as a new medium with evolving technology, the influences of the Internet on our lives have already become materialized and disseminated to a level unimaginable before. Changes in Internet technology have taught people become new modes of media production and consumption (Bakardjieva,

2005; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Wu, 2007; Zheng, 2008). For instance, traditional print media have almost universally adopted web-enhanced or web-based formats, many of which feature interactive journalism where editors and writers can have dialogues with readers. Grassroots and social networking media such as personal weblogs, Facebook, Myspace, Indymedia, and virtual communities online are proliferating in cyberspace to open space for content that reflects multiple layers of human spiritual lives, desires, and social consciousness. And technology has changed not only our perceptions of the human universe, but also the processes associated with cultural identification. For instance, computer-mediated communications (CMC) provide accessible forums that facilitate the manifestation of cultural identities (Mitra, 1997 & 2005). This is particularly true for the large number of contemporary Chinese living outside China who find themselves in the unique position of receiving and rethinking texts regarding their Chinese identity from sources uncensored by the current Chinese government.

In some ways, reading media texts entails a learning process, particularly for those in a foreign land. The accessibility to media sources brought by the Internet accelerates this social as well as cultural learning process. In my personal experience, the immediate consequence of media consumption outside China was the increased awareness of my cultural identity positioned in a multicultural surrounding where democracy is extolled, freedom has become a faith, but inequality still prevails. Along with the deepened realization of one's individual cultural differences, online media

reading engenders forms of social or group identification, particularly when one has a glimpse of how others in similar positions react to the same social issues. Online users' interpretations, with all sorts of critical, rational, sarcastic, emotive or transcendental critiques, can have particular influences on one's self-perception. These might inspire, reinforce, modify, or alter one's interpretations of current events and controversial issues. After years of online media reading in a foreign context, I have developed a research interest in the manifestation of Chinese identity in online, interactive media in the global, multicultural, and postcolonial context.

The discourse analyzed in this study comprises messages intended to be read by in-group members because they are written mostly in the Chinese language. The website's editorial eclecticism and target language (the general format of the website is in Chinese) may define the readership as well as the authorship of the content analyzed. In contrast to China-based websites pressed by ideological censorship and Chinese-dissident-run websites skewed by anti-Communism sentiments, the website examined belongs to a group of diasporic Chinese media attempting to appeal to a larger audience of Chinese overseas through a pluralistic editorial line that combines articles produced from different ideological viewpoints. However, site editors or elected board moderators and forum administrators have their own ideological leanings, which affect the selection of headline items in the news forum. In addition, the number of reads (clicks) on news and opinion pieces might lead to quasi-statistical decision making regarding the general editorial direction. Furthermore, voluntary

comments from ardent readers can also become a significant factor that may sway the decision of editors in terms of what would be the best strategy to satisfy the widest range of readership. This connection among perceptible ideological preferences in editorial line, selection of news reports, and constitution of readership is a meaningful aspect of this virtual community.

Yet, regardless of editorial manipulation, the news stories and opinions posted are sufficiently abundant, diverse, colorful, sensational, informative, and entertaining to elicit assorted reactions from individual readers. In the context of each specific event or issue covered, readers' comments convey insights from diverse perspectives to reveal the dynamics of contemporary social life and the pulse of global politics.

The messages are public, voluntary, contingent, and thereby representative of the views and reactions of participants. Besides providing space for the manifestation of emotional catharsis or "verbalistic flaunting" (obsession with displaying one's aptitude for writing), the online environment provides anonymity for contributors who may also intend to affect the opinions of others. In many cases, the Chinese netizens overseas are looking for like-minded compatriots with whom to form some sort of virtual community that can help reduce the uncertainty caused by living abroad. However, those prone to respond to peers' messages are those who sense that ideas are contrary to what they hold true and stand for. Therefore, the consensus, discrepancies, and bickering that is generated within the ingroup shows both heterogeneity and common characteristics of the group. This study explores both the

in-group heterogeneity and positions that lead to the expression of unity within the cultural group. Because of the diversity among COOCs and the salience of the intercultural context as an element that prompts interaction among members of this virtual community, this website becomes a relevant site to explore the enactment of cultural identity through intercultural communication.

Rationale and Significance

The present study deals with a particular site in cyberspace. The site is a virtual enclave that can be accessed by Chinese or anyone who can read Chinese in locations all over the world, except mainland China (including Hainan Island) as a result of the People's Republic of China (PRC) rigid and sophisticated Internet censorship (Jin, 2008; Wu, 2007). Such unique situation indicates an important aspect of the demographic characteristics of the population studied – most COOCs are Chinese living (sojourning, residing, traveling, visiting, studying, and/or working) outside China. Thereupon they all have to deal with intercultural or multicultural surroundings immediate to their daily lives. The bond with the homeland interplays with the connection (be it attachment or distance) to the host culture to offer the grounds for this exploration of COOCs' online cultural identification practices.

The results of this study show how Internet media communication facilitates COOCs' cultural identification through intercultural interaction. In the complex mix of opinion and attitudes expressed by COOCs, in-group homogeneities and heterogeneities can be discerned. The findings will contribute to generate cultural

knowledge regarding the global presentation of Chinese culture as well as of the Chinese voices in their actual and rich diversity.

Furthermore, the current study also aims to contribute to the application of intercultural communication identity theories in the investigation of mediated communications. In intercultural communication, identity theories proposed by three interpretive scholars – Donald Carbaugh, Mary Jane Collier, and Michael Hecht – have been developed to elucidate the formation of self-concept in interpersonal interactions among people with specific cultural backgrounds. The basic concepts, notions, and methods from these theories can form an integrative framework for the systematic interpretation of online messages produced by migrating people.

Lastly, a primary research goal here is to understand general trends in COOCs' cultural identification. This exploration of common ground as well as internal chasms can also shed light on both gaps in communication and chance for mutual understandings among COOCs who may have competing ideological preferences. To explore such ferment, I intend to keep a balanced, neutral approach and to be objective in my analytical endeavors, although it is impossible to maintain perfect neutrality. To some degree, my own preferences are to be coped with during the analysis.

Dubos (1981) said: "Human diversity makes tolerance more than a virtue; it makes it a requirement for survival." Tolerance is not only an issue for intercultural, interracial, and international relationships but also for people with competing

ideological preferences. While Chinese overseas might strive to adapt to the host culture by active cultural accommodation and spiritual conversion, they might feel difficult to reconcile some basic internal divisions. By situating competing ideologies among COOCs in their common challenges of cultural identification under global conditions, the current study aims to identify strategies to deal with the ideological complexity and perplexity that any intercultural communication may produce. The fundamental assumption of the aforementioned research rationale is: If people have better knowledge of their “selves” and could make themselves better known by the others, they can have better opportunities to develop tolerance toward each other.

Overview of Chapters

The chapters of the dissertation are organized in the following manner: Chapter II presents a literature review that links three relevant areas of scholarship: interpretive approaches to identity theory in the field of intercultural communication; scholarly work on identity, culture, and Internet mediated communication; and cultural studies on the Chinese diaspora and media communication. Chapter III explicates the research design rooted in the interpretive paradigm and the methodological procedures of grounded theory employed in this research. Chapters IV, V, VI, and VII elaborate on the findings of research in response to the main research questions posed, and present the conclusions.

Chapter IV discussed how Chinese overseas online commentators used online communication to interpret the multicultural differences they encounter in global

cities and thus enact processes of cultural identification. The chapter discusses how self-other comparison is the dominant interpretive strategy employed by users of Wenxuecity.com to make sense of the categories of cultural difference—in this case racial hierarchies, gender and group stereotypes and national differences—that provoked discussion among members of the diasporic community. The chapter also explores the dynamic interplay of self and other through which members of this group enact cultural identification.

In Chapter V, attention is given to how COOCs also use online forum to give and receive practical advice on how to manage situations of conflict, suffering or misunderstanding that result from exposure to new cultural environments and social contexts outside China. The chapter identifies the categories of life predicaments that draw most fervent discussion in the forum and the most common strategies given by COOCs as advice for coping with intercultural conflict, and discusses how cultural advice fosters a form of group identification that emphasizes a sense of Chinese cultural membership.

Chapter VI focuses on how Chinese overseas online commentators (COOCs) assume positions of identification in response to ideological debate and, more specifically, when reacting to criticism posed by outgroup and ingroup critics of China. The contending perceptions of China's political regime and global position and international relations—particularly the China-Western relations—will be discussed as instances that illuminate how enactment of identity involves activation of multiple

points of identification, often simultaneously: individuality, sociality, materiality, and spirituality.

Lastly, Chapter VII presents the conclusions in the form of summary answers to questions posed. It also explores the theoretical implications of this study and discusses limitations and areas of further research suggested by the findings.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation aims to probe into the process of cultural identification among members of the Chinese diaspora as enacted in mediated communication via a Chinese portal website operated in the United States and accessed mostly by Chinese outside mainland China. With identity and identification as central concepts, the first domain of this literature review discusses relevant identity theories developed by three interpretive scholars of intercultural communication. The second domain focuses on theorization and empirical research linking identity, culture, and Internet mediated communication. The third domain outlines various cultural studies on the Chinese diaspora and media communication that can also shed light on the problem under study. The fourth section of this chapter incorporates my own theoretical insights into an interpretive framework for cultural identity and presents a set of assumptions that will serve as interpretive lenses for the current study of cultural identity enacted in the online discussions of COOCs. This literature review is meant to identify relevant sources to frame this exploration of cultural identification among COOCs in hopes of producing research that leads to a better understanding of a community that is prone to marginalization, alienation, and sometimes even demonization outside China (Wu, 2007).

Interpretive Approaches to Identity Theory

Intercultural communication scholarship has embraced the concept of identity and attempted to unravel the relationship between identity and communication across

cultural contexts (Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka, 2002). Some interpretive scholars define identity as one's self-concept informed by avowal (self perception of "who I am") and ascription (social categorization) (Hall, 2005; Mendoza et al, 2002). Others have stated that identity is the performed self situated in culture (Carbaugh, 1994; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Mendoza et al, 2002). From this perspective, identification was defined as the process of enacting identity through the interplay of the ascribed self and the avowed self (Hall, 2005; Hecht et al, 2005; Jung & Hecht, 2004). Some scholars have conceptualized identification as a cultivable, manageable, negotiable, and malleable communicative process that is fluid and complex (Collier, 2005; Hecht et al, 2005; Imahori & Cupach, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 2005). Grounded in this theorization of identity as a communicative construct, I intend to understand and interpret the cultural specificity of intercultural identification in a particular group of people sharing a common language and using interactive online media.

The interpretive studies of identity are concerned primarily with sense-making processes (Hall, 2005). Intercultural communication studies on identity and identification have focused on the shared meanings, common sense, and committed values of specific cultural groups in an attempt to describe the nature of identity (Mendoza et al, 2002). They have scrutinized language codes, symbolic systems, and other peculiarities to underscore the dialectic nature of identity as coexistence of the dyadic forces of avowal and ascription in historical and socio-political contexts (Carbaugh, 1990; Collier & Thomas, 1989; Hecht, 1993; Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts,

1989; Katriel, 1986; Philipsen, 1975; Weider & Pratt, 1990). I will focus on the work of intercultural communication scholars Donal Carbaugh, Mary Jane Collier, and Michael Hecht, whose works underscore several theoretical dimensions of relevance for my project: the centrality of communication in processes of identification, the dynamic interaction between self and social context in identity enactment; and multi-dimensional and fluid character of identity.

However, it is important to note that these three scholars emphasize different angles in their research. While Carbaugh starts with a focus on the individual to explore how biological, psychological, interactive, and contextual factors influence identity; Collier has emphasized the study of how cultural identity is managed through communicative behavior in contexts of conflict, power inequalities, and intercultural alliances; and Hecht centers his theory on communication behavior as an integral aspect of identity. In this review, I summarize the key assumptions and insights offered by their research, highlighting the strengths and limitations of their theories for the development of this dissertation.

Carbaugh (1988; 1994; 1996; 2001) approached the connection between communication, identity, and culture through his ethnographic studies and narrative analysis of specific cultural and social communication scenes (Carbaugh, 1988, 1994, and 1996; Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001). To build a theoretical framework in his studies of the American concepts of personhood that operate in various American cultural scenes, Carbaugh (1996) treated identity as performed communication. In his

conceptualization, identity is embedded in the concept of an “agent” acting various social roles in various social situations. He linked the agent to three identity-related dimensions: individual (biological being of the smallest social unit), self (psychological being), and person (cultural being). At the level of the individual, identity refers to biological existence and identification of a neurological processing that allows the agent to think and act. At the level of self, identity is socially constructed, and it is the movement between various social scenes and relational webs that helps form one’s concept of self, which is primarily psychological. At the level of person, identity is culturally configured and lived in the diversity of global cultures. Carbaugh (1990; 1994; 1996) has argued that specific social interactions set stages for cultural identification and communication facilitates the interplay between identity and social relationships.

In effect, Carbaugh (1996) has viewed identity as a dimension and outcome of a system of communication practices produced in social and cultural interactions through activities such as dialogue. Those who produce and deliver as well as those who receive and critically react to sociocultural discourses may position themselves differently in different contexts. Therefore, Carbaugh observed that researchers should be mindful of the specific “material, economic, religious, political (and so on) conditions of living in that community” (1996, p.143). As the natural core of personhood, identity is embedded in individual differences, perpetuated in the biological existence and psychological reaction of the persons, and situated in social

contexts. Therewith, he has taken a descriptive, interpretive, and comparative approach to explore modes of identification in particular messages intentionally or spontaneously generated in specific social scenes (cited in Mendoza et al, 2002). Generally, in Carbaugh's perspective, identities are maintained and evidenced in interactional social discourses.

Carbaugh's ethnographic studies of popular scenes, culturally specific narratives and conversations are defined as sites to explore how communication can manifest and reinforce the personal and social aspects of identity in social relationships. Carbaugh (2001, p.122-123) treats narratives as cultural discourses that provide a space to explore the meanings of identity. Narratives are texts that enact a variety of situations, forms, meanings, events, acts, instruments, terms, motifs, motives, and values (Carbaugh, 1996). From this perspective, mythic storylines, ceremonial occasions, or talk of mundane affairs can reveal specific life challenges or contingencies of everyday living as well as the material and spiritual dimensions of cultural identification (Carbaugh, 1996). Carbaugh's field work through participant observation and ethnography allowed him to empirically examine the connection between narratives and cultural identification. Carbaugh (1990) concluded that researchers can make sense of cultural identity through listening to "culture talking itself."

Collier's theory (2005) on cultural identity and identification is intended to uncover how cultural identity is managed and performed through various forms of

discourses, interactions, and social structures. Committed to developing praxis-driven understandings of the enactment of identities in various contextualized and unequal human interactions, Collier (2005) has concluded that cultural identities vary in terms of function, salience, scope, and intensity over time and space. Collier's theoretical claims are largely based on a qualitative research agenda and methodologies such as ethnography and discourse analysis. In ethnographic studies of intercultural conversations in specific contexts, Collier has developed her notion of the complexity of cultural identity and identification. For instance, she observed that the norms and consequences of intercultural conversations are multilayered, multifactorial, contextual, and relational. Furthermore, she argued that the recognition of identity politics and power relationships is an indispensable part of the study of intercultural identification. Different political stances, class-related social statuses, sexuality- and gender-based ideologies, racial-ethnic-national group memberships, religious-spiritual affiliations, institutional rules, personal relationships, and many other contextual factors complicate the application of identity labels (Collier & Thomas, 1988, 1989). Since the enactments of diverse cultural identities involve various positioning situations, Collier stressed and elaborated the concept of positional salience (the situational standing out of a particular dimension or property of identity) and its dynamic nature over time and space. In her studies of cultural identities as they emerged in ingroup or intergroup communication, Collier also examined the dyadic pathways of avowal and ascription and their coexistence as a force driving the general

process of cultural identification.

Based on empirical and theoretical endeavors, Collier (2005) has moved her studies of cultural identification toward the integration of critical and interpretive perspectives with the realization of imbalanced power negotiation as an important factor, and an awareness of positionality. In Collier's metatheoretical perspective, the incorporation of critical perspectives into her interpretive scholarship can orient communication studies of cultural identity toward social transformation. Collier has realized that the inequalities of socioeconomic status and imbalance of power profoundly define the disadvantageous situation of marginalized groups in enacting their cultural identities. Taking it as a step further, such inequalities and imbalances produce a variety of positionalities also among those involved in processes of research, mainly among scholars, informants, and readers. Positionality is a concept that speaks to historical and social inequalities and questions the presumed equality and agency of individual actors. With these considerations, Collier has applied the concept of cultural identification in the study of intercultural alliances and mediation of intercultural conflict (Collier and Thomas, 1988; Collier and Ribeau, 1993).

Hecht's communication theory of identity (CTI) places identity in social interaction and views communication behavior as an integral aspect of identity (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). Hecht (1993) proposed some important axiomatic propositions about communication and identity to describe the dynamic features of identity within a schema of multiplicity. To describe African American and Mexican

American ethnic cultures in terms of their intra- and inter-ethnic communication behavior, Hecht and his colleagues conducted a series of empirical studies (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Hecht & Faulkner, 2000; Hecht, Faulkner, Meyer, Niles, Golden, & Cutler, 2002; Hecht, Jackson, Lindsley, & Johnson, 2001) to illustrate similarities and differences among these ethnic groups. Influenced by this line of research, Hecht developed CTI, which integrated Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979 and 1986) and identity theory in the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Hecht, 1993; Mead, 1934).

Hecht's CTI views identity as communicative. In such a perspective, communication becomes identification and communicated messages comprise identity. Hecht et al (1993) identified two paths through which communication is integral to the formation of identity. The first path is the creation and exchange of symbolic meanings through social interaction, in which the sense of identity is felt and therein identity is formed in relation to self. The generation of messages not only provides the basis of identification but also becomes enactment or manifestation of identities. The second path is the association with and contestation of social categorization, which contextualizes social and personal expectations and motivations. The perceptions of social expectations and individual motivations, wrongful or righteous, fallacious or realistic, influence one's communication styles, rhetorical strategies, and their consequences.

CTI is also built on a set of assumptions informed by postmodernist notions of

self. As Hecht (1993; Hecht et al, 2003; Hecht et al, 2005) posited, identity has multiple loci, designated as the personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers. In his view, these four interrelated and interpenetrated frames reveal the essence of identity. According to CTI, in the personal layer, identity represents an individual's self-concept or understanding of how one defines oneself. In the enactment layer, identity is acted out, performed, or expressed in communication. In the process of relational development, the relational aspect of identity can be further divided into three levels: formation (constitution), identification (an individual identifies with a group), and unification (the relational union of two identities can establish a new identity). The communal layer reflects the influence of group membership on identity formation. To integrate the four layers of identity, Hecht has stressed the interpenetration of the layers by obscuring their distinctness or boundary lines.

Hecht et al (2005) also postulated 18 propositions as CTI's working assumptions, grounded in the four-layer model. Given my goal of studying cultural identification enacted in mediated communication texts, I will discuss three CTI propositions that I believe are most relevant and distinctive. At the end of this literature review, I will incorporate these propositions into a model of cultural identity to be used as an analytical framework for the present project.

"Identities are affective, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual." This proposition implies the significance of emotive and psychological factors. The emotionality and subjectivity involved in the process of identification is inevitable but

constrained by individual and social perceptions and behavioral norms. Thus, awareness of social context, cultural knowledge, and ideological influence is crucial in managing, negotiating, and enacting one's subjective cultural identity.

"Identities involve both subjective and ascribed meaning." The subjective meaning of identities contains one's self-concept. The ascribed meaning of identities indicates the influence of social categorization. The two aspects of identity meanings are oftentimes mixed, though the analytical treatment can help reveal the true sense of identity in the perspective of an individual as well as in the social milieu existing outside the individual.

"Identities are codes that are expressed in conversations and define membership in communities." This proposition facilitates the coding strategy adopted in this project to sort out textual evidence of the diversity of Chinese diasporic communities. After preliminary reading of the textual data from online interactive discussion, I found that identity codes were prevalent and abounding. The challenge is how to sort out those identity markers into a more perceptible system via an interpretive scheme so as to help people better make sense the significance of the diversity of cultural identity within the researched cultural community. In Chapter III, I will discuss the coding strategy in detail.

A further development in the examination of the interplay of the multiple layers of identity was Hecht and Jung's (2003) concept of "identity gap," which refers to the discrepancy or contradiction between and among layers. Altogether, they cited

six possible identity gaps in the matrix of four interpenetrated layers. For instance, an individual's enacted identity in communication or relational interactions may be different in the personal identity one perceives or expects. Frustration, disheartenment or lack of security may arise from such gaps.

In sum, identity is a fruitful concept in interpretive scholarship of intercultural communication. As reviewed above, Collier, Carbaugh, and Hecht offer their approaches to communication and culture through the concepts of identity and identification. Nonetheless, each addresses the complexity of identity through different constructs. Collier stresses the theoretical complexity by deconstructing multiplicity of identity into issues of salience, intensity, positionality, and social transformation. Carbaugh, on the other hand, views the identity of an agent culturally and communicatively configured through biological, social, spiritual, and material dimensions. Finally, Hecht depicts a four-layer schema of multiplicity that interconnect personal, relational, enacted, and communal properties of identity into an interpretive system he labeled CTI. Yet in the perspectives of all three scholars, identity has been integrated into a conceptual system linking culture and communication.

Interestingly, to forecast future research orientations in CTI, Hecht et al (2005) have suggested that online social interactions in the computer-mediated world can produce virtual communities in which identity may have more salient and diverse positions and processes. Computer-mediated communication settings provide unique

environments for people to exchange messages and thus perform, conceal, modify, or transform their identities. Therefore, some aspects of their identities hidden in face-to-face communication can become salient. Online anonymity or, more precisely, pseudonymity allows communicators to express their points of view in a presumably unconstrained manner and present what they usually restrain in other settings. Because Internet-based communication is unbounded by social scale and geographic restriction, online content providers and commentators may evoke myriads of viewpoints and identity politics, and even engage in blatant discussions of critical issues and problematic events. Hecht et al (2005) were confident that the innovative application of CTI can help explain how identities are formed, acted out, managed, manifested, challenged, confronted, manipulated, and veered in the online social interactions. In the next section, I will review relevant literature on computer-mediated communication that has examined the concept of identity in media studies.

Culture, Identity, and Internet Mediated Communication

Identity connotes subjectivity and power in the world of culturalist and interpretivist media studies (Appadurai, 1996; Grossberg, 1993; Hall, 1996b & 1997; Hillis, 1999; Shome & Hegde, 2002). Concepts like representation, annihilation, intention, manipulation, domination, subjugation, creativity, agenda-setting, and even conspiracy are often employed when approaching the dynamics between production and consumption of media and the construction of identities. The fragmentation and fluid dynamics of identity situated in geopolitical and ideological contexts have

received substantial attention. Identity construction is thus seen as a process caught in a virtual world where individual, social, global, and historical realities are mediated to engender a diversity of identifications.

In the epoch of the Internet, identity tends to be viewed as more fragmented than ever (Hecht, 2005). Rejecting the essentialist, unified, singular, and static conception of identity, Hall (1996b) stressed a more fragmented, dynamic and multifaceted idea of identity constructed through discourses and immersed in power dynamics. As Grossberg (1996) observed, the concept of identity based on the differentiation of social categories, like nationality, gender or race, becomes insufficient to count the growing internal fractures of identities. Further, the model that looks at identity in light of conditions of oppression or subjugation, prevalent in postcolonial and critical race theories, is limited and inappropriate if one deals with proliferating fractions of a more and more diverse population in the contemporary global context (Grossberg, 1996). Along these lines, Hall's (1996b) theoretical endeavors to rethink identity in cultural studies have been devoted to the promotion of an identity theory that considers the internal, "psychic mechanism" of identity as a product of self's interplay with society on the borderlands of objectivity and subjectivity. Concurrent with such critical reflections, is the concern with the revolutionary impact of the constantly evolving communication technologies on the landscapes of culture and media.

The fragmentation of identity has been best studied in Internet mediated

discourses (Mitra, 1997, 2002, & 2005) partly because of a key distinction between the Internet and traditional media, that is, accessibility and interactivity (Al-Saggaf, 2006). Online communication started by free and open access to shared information sources among people with common interests (Helland, 2007). As a versatile medium (Choi et al, 2006), the Internet facilitates the nonlinear presentation of information and accelerates the convergence of multimedia by blending images, sounds, texts, and links (Dimitrova & Neznanski, 2006). The Internet or the World Wide Web allows the almost-instant delivery of content from sources to audiences (Dimitrova & Neznanski, 2006). With help of the Internet, the spatial reach of information becomes unprecedentedly broader (Choi et al, 2006; Mitra, 2005). Dial-up, landline, Wi-Fi, satellite, mobile phone, among other technologies, further diversify people's accesses to the Internet. Most prominently, the Internet has significantly escalated the interactivity and strengthened the audience involvement in news (Croteau, 2996; Nah & Shah, 2006; Owens & Palmer, 2003; Pickard, 2006) and entertainment industries (Jenkins, 2003; Shefrin, 2004). In Helland's (2007) words, the Internet has become a bustling and boisterous "megalopolis" where tensions and aggressions within groups or across groups over a plethora of topics are heating up people's mindsets. The interactivity of online media sustained by reader-friendly formats such as chat rooms, discussion boards, blogd, instant messages, and convenient online polls can be categorized as a sphere of both content and interpersonal interactivity (Massey & Levy, 1999). Content interactivity means consumers can select what they like in terms

of content and/or providers. Interpersonal interactivity refers to readers' capacity to get involved in conversations with the authors of messages and among themselves.

The Internet has caused critical changes in the dynamic landscape of mass media and human behavior. With nearly unbounded capacity and a decentralizing propensity, the Internet helps society become more and more individualized (Hodkinson, 2007). In the observed trend of online individualization, traditional social, institutional, and relational constraints are losing their coercive force to encircle individuals within the boundaries of collective identities (Bauman, 2001; Doheny-Farina, 1996; Hodkinson, 2007). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have noticed that new technologies have fostered a DIY (do-it-yourself) culture that makes the fragmented, isolated, and unstable individual with fluid identities the primary social unit. However, concurrent with the trend toward individualization is the fact that the constitution of large communities divided by cultural membership, religious affiliation, and ideological preferences is also taking place across geographical lines (Helland, 2007; Sassenberg, 2002).

In this regard, Helland (2007) has noted that as early as the early 1980s USENET was utilized to preserve and develop Jewish and Hindu Diasporic identities among people sharing group memberships but residing in different areas of the globe. The Internet is also a medium of networking for people in various places, particularly those in a diaspora who would like to maintain some aspects of their identities such as traditional rituals and spiritual beliefs.

In addition, the Internet provides a context that makes people across cultures less restrained in expressing their opinions (Abdulla, 2007; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Nah & Shah, 2006) and thus contributes to a more democratic public sphere (Pickard, 2006). Diverse ideas and arguments from multiple perspectives as well as their disputation and cross-examination can help expand the public sphere of the society (Dewey, 1954; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1989; Ho and McLeod, 2007; Katz, 1997) and create a well-informed audience (Fishkin, 1995).

However, according to Noelle-Neumann's (1993, 1974) spiral of silence theory—a model of public opinion's dynamics—hegemonic social situations tend to diminish the voices of minorities who are constrained by the social sanctions set by the perceived majority and afraid of being socially isolated by the powerful (Anderson, 1996; Miller, 2005). Still, in the environment of the Internet, people who voice their views do not have to present themselves as in face-to-face interaction and can more freely reveal their authentic opinions with less concern for institutional security and interpersonal facework (Min, 2007; Morris & Ogan, 2002; Tait, 2008; Watanabe, 2007). Most prominently, people can choose to broadcast their individual points of view anonymously and avoid being trapped in personal or interpersonal embarrassment. Indeed, empirical research has shown that in computer-mediated communication people tend to be more comfortable and less inhibited to engage in heartened discussions of controversial issues (Abdulla, 2007; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). The Internet makes people more self-righteous

and this may be good for a more democratic civic society. With minimal presence of the researcher and the accepted legitimacy of online anonymity, data collected from online forums can be expected to yield greater diversity of opinions and perspectives from the participants (Watanabe, 2007).

Recent research on ethnic or cultural virtual communities bounded by common languages, shared group membership or general social categorizations has provided insights on both cohesion and internal fragmentation manifested in messages produced and exchanged among ingroup participants (Watanabe, 2007). For example, in the context of intensifying tensions between the West and Arabic/Islamic worlds, scholars have examined how Arabic speech communities may perceive major historical events such as 9/11 and the U.S. led invasion of Iraq (Abdulla, 2007; Al-Saggaf, 2006). Focusing on a descriptive textual analysis of online data from three major Arabic discussion boards in the Arab and Muslim world, Abdulla (2007) demonstrated how Muslims reacted differently to the 9/11 attacks. In another study, Friedman (2005) argued that Web information has already formed a virtual public space providing Latin American lesbians opportunities and tools for changing the dominant social perceptions of their cultural and group identity. Likewise Kim and Yun (2007) employed Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) relational dialectics theory to understand how interpersonal relationships become important issues in one major Korean social network site. Tan and Tan (2008) has argued that language variety (the local, Singaporean English versus standardized English), regardless of the topics and

contents, affected the perceptions of social status and expertise among Singaporean Internet political discussers. And comparing mainstream online media and Africana.com, Brock (2006) constructed a content-evaluation framework considering historical, sociological, and philosophical dimensions in the assessment of cultural identification and representation in African Americans' online experiences. Brock's analysis showed an existing set of basic cultural differences between mainstream and black websites.

In this sense, the Internet constitutes a discursive platform that attracts and encourages more diverse messages and more personal ideas from individual cultural members. Al-Saggaf (2006) suggested that online discourse is more trustworthy and therefore more valuable research data to reflect on group thoughts and sentiments among people who often face a tightly controlled traditional media environment in the Arabic world. Through the examination of the Arabic readers' reactions to news threads edited and published on a popular Arabic website sponsored by a major Arabic TV station, Al-Saggaf (2006) discussed the potential of online media to become an influential public sphere attracting Arabic civic participation. In another study, Muhtaseb and Frey (2008) concluded that the most salient motive of Arab Americans for using the Internet is to seek information from foreign-based sources.

Observing the increasing trend of Indian immigration in the West and its presence in the cyberspace, Mitra (1997, 2002, & 2005) did a series of interpretive studies on virtual ethnic communities formed online and their digital discourses.

Based on an overview of India-related WWW messages – links, pages, and sites from as early as 1997 – Mitra (1997) developed his description and explanation of the formation of an ad hoc virtual Indian community. By focusing on one particular website, India Related Links, a webpage created by an Indian graduate student in Canada, Mitra sorted out how the virtual community has been strengthened by deliberating the distinction between ingroup and outgroup identities among the perceived contributors and visitors. In another study of online Indian identification, Mitra (2002) illustrated how Internet could be a relatively secure place for immigrants to reconcile their identity conflicts with their adopted cultures.

Although the Internet entered ordinary people's daily life less than two decades ago, the online manifestation of Chinese culture has become phenomenal (Wu, 2007). Based on empirical studies of two online communities of new Chinese migrants in Singapore, Chan (2006) argued that promotion of diverse and distinct identity options (tolerating different definitions of "Chinese" such as statist, socialist, or nationalist Chinese) had been a principal strategy of the web administrators to attract and maintain a wider range of users. Xie (2008) conducted ethnographic research on the relational dynamics of an online community of older Chinese formed through three computer-mediated communication modes: voice chat, forums, and instant messages. Xie (2008) concluded that particular Internet modes had different communication effects on the socialization of senior citizens, such as the use of chat rooms for companionship, online forums for information seeking, and instant

messaging for emotional support. And through a historical approach and with mixed methodologies (quantitative and qualitative), Wu (2007) described the short but intense evolution of Chinese cyber nationalism – a more spontaneous, sentimental, collective, and internet-promoted acclamation of Chinese ideology that is different from the state-sponsored patriotism.

Chinese Identity in the Diaspora

The study of cultural identification accentuates the nodal connections between self conceptualization and group membership defined by social categorization (ascription) and/or personal preferences (avowal) (Hall, 2005). The structure of identity and the process of identification can be complex (Carbaugh, 1994; Collier, 2005; Hecht, 2005). Considering the inherent heterogeneities of large cultural groups such as the Chinese, their perceptions of themselves in relation to others—either ingroup or outgroup—must be kaleidoscopic. It can be argued, on the one hand, an awareness of the complexity of cultural identity prepares people to deal with problems caused by intercultural encounters. On the other hand, the discourses in online messages produced by members of a certain culture also demonstrate how they can maintain static and even stereotypical perspectives on particular cultural identities. This section reviews literature that illuminates how different regional origins, historical and geopolitical influences, and national and transnational imaginaries have shaped Chinese identity overseas. The complexity of this identity formation has been discussed in scholarly interpretations of “Chineseness” that have given attention to the

perceptions and performance of global citizens of Chinese background.

For most individuals of Chinese origin, the Chinese cultural identity is a combination of ethnicity, nationality, religion, tradition, class, locality, community, interpersonal relationships, and other factors or politicized personal preferences (Chan, 2006; Gao, 2006; Sun, 2002; Wickberg, 2007). As Chan (2006) observed, the new waves of Chinese migrants in global cities, relatively more educated and from more diverse regions of origin than the earlier colonial coolies from a couple of southern provinces in China, are facing more identity options and therefore more conflicts. Three models proposed by Ward (1965, quoted in Chan, 2006) to interpret identity construction among Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora include the immediate model of dialect awareness, the internal model of inter-subgroup relationships, and the ideological model regarding a pan-Chinese identity promoted by the People's Republic of China (PRC). The first two models are based on the knowledge of the dialects of original regions. These apply primarily to situations before the 1980s, when Chinese overseas formed their communities with emphasis on the commonality of native places. Ever since, with the downplaying of PRC's communist ideology and the promotion of a discourse of economic growth, new types of Chinese national identity positions emerged. These are characterized by the tensions between the PRC government and its dissidents as well as by the frictions between the dominant Han Chinese and some minority nationalities in the zones of Tibet and Xinjiang (He and Guo, 2000; Harrison, 1995; Kim and Dittmer, 1993, quoted in Chan, 2006). Therefore,

the new Chinese migrants from the PRC cannot ignore the conflicts that engender new identity options, options that challenge the doctrines promoted by the Mainland's government.

As Hall (1996b) noted, cultural identity, as both a process and a structure, matters with the past and projects the future. With a positioning across time and space, any particular cultural identity is in constant flux or transformation. The history of the Chinese in the global colonial and contemporary context is often perceived and thereby interpreted differently by members of the ingroup and outgroup (Sun, 2002; Tsu, 2006a). The "Chinese factor" was once the source of an inferiority complex among some Chinese immigrant children (who felt ashamed of their Chinese identity because of the inferior and marginalized social status of Chinese culture as well as negative stereotyping of individual Chinese's physical conditions) in the West, particularly in the U.S. (Lei, 1931, as quoted in Liu, 2007; Tsu, 2006a & 2006b). The history of China's national failures in the colonial period and postwar diplomatic setbacks after two world wars also had the effect of denigrating individuals of Chinese background (Lien, 2006; Tsu, 2006a & 2006b; Yin, 2007; Wickberg, 2007), especially when such perception of national disgrace coincided with particular personal and communal predicaments, either psychological or physical or both.

From the U.S. Congress' 1882 legislation of the Chinese Exclusion Act to its repeal in 1943 (Fowler, 2007; Lee, 2003; Norton, 1924), a period that saw a decline of Chinese population in the U.S., the rise of Chinese nationalism among Chinese

overseas was perceptible (Tsu, 2006). During that particular period of exclusion (1882-1943), an anti-Chinese ideology was widespread and became prevalent all over the world's colonial territories and major colonial centers. For instance, besides the U.S. Chinese Exclusion Act there were the White Australian Policy, Canadian Chinese Immigration Act (Canadian head tax), and New Zealand head tax, all singling out Chinese individuals through administrative and legislative means. Due to blatant racial prejudice, fueled by historically specific labor and economic factors, the Chinese in the diaspora were physically attacked, mentally abused, politically marginalized, socially segregated, and culturally alienated in the U.S. and other nations and colonial territories. Brutal crimes were committed, such as massacres, homicides, rapes, and abuses of ethnic Chinese. The crimes ended up with few victims compensated and even fewer criminals punished (Daniels, 1988). For instance, in the Rock Springs massacre, in Wyoming, Chinese miners were “burned, scalped, mutilated, branded, decapitated, dismembered, and hanged from gutter spouts,” but the few criminals arrested as suspects were released and even “treated to a regular ovation” (Courtwright, 1998; Gardner, 2003; Daniels, 1988; Lyman, 2001). However, the fact that anti-Chinese sentiments originated in the most heinous aspects of Western modernity has been essentially overlooked in Western scholarship.

Tsu (2006) has posited that the more oppressive the hegemonic ideologies against the Chinese overseas, the more they tend to cultivate their Chinese nationalism—even with its contested meanings. The national failure of China in the

colonial period and cultural humiliation felt by Chinese produced an immense energy with the potential to become a source of resistance and internal cohesion among the adherents of Chinese nationalism (Tsu, 2006). In postcolonial times, particularly since the second half of the 20th century, global cultural movements fueled by Western economic expansion and Cold War ideological battles have once again undermined and even demonized China, Chinese culture, and Chinese identity (Liu & Li, 1996; Wu, 2007). In contemporary Western discourse, China is often portrayed as a defeated super nation instead of a victim of colonial atrocities, and anything “Chinese” is associated with a homogeneous brand of continental, cheap products (Tsu, 2006b). Yet, disqualified as a colonial sufferer, Chinese identity is in the perennial blind spot of postcolonial criticism rooted in the West (Barker & Hulme, 1994; Chrisman & Parry, 2000).

Facing enduring disrespect and discrimination, Chinese individuals are given limited sympathy. Individual Chinese overseas have to spend extra energy dealing with unfavorable social environments, where their Chineseness frames their self-conceptualization (Wickberg, 2007). While deeply entrapped in the perception of national disgrace and negative stereotyping spurred by the Western military spoliations, political incursions, ideological oppression, physiological prejudice, and cultural harassment (Tsu, 2006b), Chinese overseas directly witness the bigoted ignorance, ethnic discrimination, and stereotyping that prevails as common sense in their adopted cultures (Dikotter, 1992; Liu & Li, 1997; Wu, 2007). According to

Gramsci (Joll, 1977; Hall, 1996a), in any political context, common sense is formed and fueled by hegemonic ideologies – in the case of the Chinese overseas, by hegemonic Western ideologies. On the other hand, the Chinese may also develop a hypersensitive mindset that keeps them entangled in the psychosis of victimization and makes them particularly susceptible to derision. This hypersensitivity and fragile self-esteem among Chinese individual has to do with the historical positioning and imaging of Chinese national identity in the global context (Osnos, 2008; Pei, 2002; Wickberg, 2007). However, the victimization among Chinese and their descendents in the global diaspora has seldom become the central topic of scholarly discussion (Tsu, 2006). As this research will show, this victim complex is manifested indeed in the online discourses of random but passionate, contingent and persistent Chinese commentators.

After 1949, with the establishment of a communist regime in mainland China – the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Chinese identity was further split along the lines of ideological struggles (Pei, 2002, as cited in Keane, 2003). The PRC has been represented as a subjugated nation ruled by an inhumane government, culturally exotic, politically different, and alien to Western sensibility (Wu, 2007). After the period of internal political strives (early 1950s to the end of 1970s, such as the Great Leap and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), the discourse about the infamy of PRC’s human rights records has been intensified in the Western media by a series of historical events climaxed at the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, clampdown on Fa Lun

Gong, and repression of the “unrestful” Xinjiang and Tibetan margins (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002; Hughes, 2006; Mann, 2007; Perry & Selden, 2003; Schell, 1995; Shirk, 2008; Tsao & Seymour, 1998; Wu, 2007).

The complexity of the identity performed by Chinese in the global diaspora thus echoes these discourses about the internal divisions and irreconcilable ideological positionings, such as diverse opinions regarding Tibet, East Turkistan (Xinjiang Uigur), Taiwan independence, Chinese democratic dissidents, and other regional differences (Bush, 2005; Pei, 2002; Keane, 2003). Keane (2003) referred to the chaos of Chinese internal divisions as the “China imploding.” Townsend (1996 as cited in Chan, 2005 & 2006) posited that the coexistence of four different nations sustains the complexity of Chinese identity: the official Chinese nation of the PRC, the dominant Han’s nation, the PRC plus Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, and the Chinese overseas with cultural affinity to the PRC.

Nonetheless, to describe the complexity of Chinese identity in an exhaustive way is impossible, because the meaning of being Chinese is always dynamic and contested. In effect, this “imploded” China and fragmented Chinese identity (Chan, 2006; Sun, 2002; Wong, 2003; Wu, 2007) manifest themselves in the online discourses analyzed for this dissertation, particularly in the reactions to news and in the discussion produced by Chinese individuals in the global context. A Chinese diasporic identity is enacted through conflicting discourses such as criticism or appreciation of the Chinese homeland, promotion or discouragement of acculturation,

or individualist resistance to racism in the host cultures.

The enactment of a diasporic identity has found in cyberspace a meaningful social space. The Internet provides a specially versatile and powerful medium that can serve a utilitarian function in the migrants' adaptation to the adopted cultures as well as in the assertion of their cultural identity through discursive connections with other "like-minded" people in the world (Sautman, 1994; Wickberg, 2007; Wong, 2003; Wu, 2007).

In North America alone, research has shown that about two thirds of the Chinese have Internet access (Wickberg, 2008). Further, Yang (2003, as quoted in Chan 2006) has called attention to the formation of an online transnational Chinese cultural sphere constituted of Chinese-language websites and producing globally circulated discourses targeting the Chinese readership. Simultaneous with the expression of Chinese national identity is the force of internal fragmentation displayed by online discourses that collide with or corroborate each other (Befu, 1993; Chan, 2006).

Instead of neutralization, the cyber media's dual forces of homogenization and diversification (Mitra, 1997, as quoted in Chan 2006) have further intensified the chaotic situation of an "imploded" China and fragmented Chinese identity. This internal diversity concurs with homogenization and contributes to the formation of a transnational Chinese identity that is dynamic, contested, negotiated, multifaceted, and contingent (Befu, 1993; Chan, 2006). While even the essential characteristics of such a transnational Chinese identity are in constant flux, any attempt to grasp the

cultural identification processes among Chinese overseas has to consider the internal differences within the Chinese diaspora dispersed across the globe. The current research aims to explore general tendencies within the transnational Chinese identity as well as its internal diversification.

In general, to study Chinese identity as manifested in cyberspace, we need to deal with the complexity of Chinese glories, disgraces, and hopes in the past, present, and future, which can be reflected in a prismatic manner through the various realities that any individuals of Chinese background have to live in. While ancient glories can be extolled, discounted, or appropriated, past national failures and present ideological embarrassments may become sources fueling deliberate or spontaneous reactions. The future of the Chinese identity, which represents one fifth or more of humanity, ties to not only people's interpretations of the world's colonial past and perceptions of the present global geopolitics, but also to the multifarious realities of all human beings, including those of non-Chinese origin. National failures, diasporic predicaments, racial oppression, social marginalization, ideological demonization, body stereotyping, cultural alienation, and other discursive forces derived from the Western hegemony combine to create an unfavorable global public sphere that Chinese overseas may have closer and more direct contact with than their compatriots within PRC.

Paradoxically, concepts of national pride and national shame coexist and codetermine the nature of Chinese nationalism performed in online discourses; these are interpretive frames around which the identification with Chinese culture can be

questioned, challenged, and manipulated. Thereupon, it would be fruitful to analyze the online discourse via the interpretive framework informed by communication theories of cultural identity. In the next section of this chapter, I provide description of a theoretical framework that I formulate and use in the analysis of selected online data.

An Integrating Theoretical Framework

Drawing on Collier, Carbaugh, and Hecht, hereafter I configure an interpretive framework of cultural identity to be used in the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of diasporic Chinese identities as enacted through online discourses. This framework contains: a) a definition of cultural identity from a communication perspective; b) a description of the structural properties and dimensions of cultural identity; and c) consideration of contextual issues related to the positioning of cultural identity. The section closes with a discussion of the particular dynamics of enacting cultural identity in online presentation, followed by the exposition of the basic assumptions underlying this research.

The Concept of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is defined here as one's self-concept formed and performed in communication that emphasizes one's connection to cultural membership. Cultural identification is the enactment of cultural identity. Cultural identity has a dimension that I term the "cultural core" to refer to the individual's sense of connection of the self with group membership, as in, for instance, the manifestation of sentimental attachments and attitudinal orientations toward one's nationality or ethnicity. Through

communication, individuals develop their concept of self based on the self-perception as well as others interpretations of their social image, which is subject to the influences of all sorts of social categorizations and cultural stereotypes. The formation of cultural identity is a constant dynamic process that responds and reacts to specific sociocultural contexts.

The Four Constituent Prongs of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is a schema of multiplicity with four dimensional properties intersecting and interpenetrating each other at its cultural core, forming a crystalline and tetrahedral image like that of a caltrop (Dong, 2008 & 2009). The four dimensional properties of cultural identity are two pairs of foundational dialectics: individuality—sociality and materiality—spirituality, which influence the generation of identity discourses.

Individuality. Similar to Hecht's personal frame of identity (Hecht, 2005), the prong of individuality refers to personal traits like corporeality, personality, temperament, and biogenetic traces. The dimension of individuality and its rotation can be exemplified by the following quote:

Discrimination? What is discrimination? How to prove the allegation of discrimination? I don't see this case has anything to do with discrimination. Ms Han deserves sympathy but this could happen to anybody of any race... That woman's personal academic quandary has nothing to do with other Chinese students... (Ren Zai Bei Mei, Oct 23, 2005)

Sociality. The prong of sociality refers to internalized social norms and perspectives on social structures and relations derived from one's communal, relational, familial, cultural, institutional, and public communication experiences. For

instance, in demonstrating a perspective about the US higher education system, one commentator belabored:

The system that produces PhDs is skewed. After doing bench work in a lab for several years, what will you learn? Your mind will be narrowed to a set of experiments and some writing skills that can wrap up garbage into published papers. Let's face it. PhD students are cheap labor and post-docs just bench jobs (commentary from Bao Bao Jiu Le Bu, Sept 5, 2007).

Materiality. Materiality means the perception of and actions on objective conditions of existence or livelihood, such as family deficit, control of resources, lifestyles, socially recognized personal accomplishment, individual economic situations, and other macro socioeconomic situations like economic development or global finances that influence the constitution of a cultural identity. For example, in a self-cultural-depreciating commentary, one attributed Chinese in the U.S. as “Stingy, as five thousand years of parsimony did a good job... If one smells a little bit of money all others will follow.”

Spirituality. In contrast to materiality, spirituality represents one’s subjective perceptions and reactions to matters of value, belief, and faith issues, including both fundamental (e.g. ideological and political stance) and transcendental (e.g. moral and religious belief) topics. The following commentary illustrates the commentator’s transcendental worldview with a strong pro-China cultural core:

Confucianism and Chinese culture in general are much superior compared to those ridiculous West religions, which are causing a lot of problems in today's world and may eventually result in the demise of human civilization. Hatred among conflicting religions have lasted thousands of years and cost millions of lives and the worst is yet to come. It may not take very long before a Muslim terrorist group gets access to nuclear technology and sets one dirty bomb off. In contrast, our Chinese culture doesn't worship any stupid self-

claimed “god” and never seeks to “rule the world” or “export ideas.” I am very proud to see China as the only major player in today's world with no official religion. Don't tell me moral standards would be low without religions. Confucianism teaches people more than enough to be good citizens (commentary from Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010).

These four interrelated prongs constitute the basic structural constituents of cultural identity. Intersecting one another, they engender multiple cognitive and interpretive frames and positionalities, from which one makes sense of self and society. Such frames also influence how people generate discourses with embedded identity traces.

The generation of identity discourses is the very process of identification. Every message in a certain context reflects some aspects of one's cultural identity. In this research, I will study identity discourses through the analysis of the four constituent prongs of cultural identities and their interrelationships in the process of cultural identification.

The Contextual Factors of Identity Discourses

Interpretation of particular identity discourses needs to consider various contextual issues that constrain and enable their presentations. The consideration of the contexts of identity discourses addresses the connection between individual enactments of online commentators and their sociocultural, political, and economic environments. This connection is, arguably, shaped by four contextual factors.

Gravity force – Influence of existing hegemonies. The omnipresent influence of power is like the gravity force on the planet, inescapable and fundamental

for the formation and performance of any individual cultural identity. Power asymmetry, such as in the control of resources, unequal representation of voices or differential institutional legitimacy, leads to existing social inequalities. Under the influence of power dynamics, cultural identification may encounter unexpected twists and contradictions that work to reinforce the dominant system of power.

Resistance – On emancipation and empowerment. The energy from resistance is an antithesis of gravity force, meaning the capacity to counterforce oppression from hegemony. Resistance is, arguably, proportional to the extent to which individuals perceive their oppression and, thereby, may exist mostly as discursive acts that shape identity discourses through the choices of particular rhetorical strategies. The movement from rhetoric of resistance to the constitution of social of political movements is a process that can be sporadic but momentous.

Topography – Geopolitical landscape and social/institutional hierarchy. This category includes historically formed structures, ranging from global geopolitical constructs, corporate or state entities, and all levels of institutions, to the immediate platforms of discourses supported and limited by technology.

Timeline – The historical contexts. History influences the formation and performance of cultural identity through chronology of events and people's memories and interpretations of things past.

All the contextual factors operate simultaneously to shed light on the online enactment of cultural identity. Like the structure of a caltrop, cultural identification is

also a multidimensional and holistic scenario, whose analysis calls for the elaboration of an integral model for the study of identity (Dong, 2008). The presentation of such a holographic picture through discourse analysis can deepen our understanding of the dynamics of cultural identity.

The Online Presentation of Identity Discourses

Cultural identity can be enacted and observed in online discourses. Online manifestation of cultural identity is an identification process that reveals individual identity positioned in particular contexts. Yet, comments to specific postings by Internet users are also shaped by the topography of cyberspace. The distinctive online setting becomes a key factor in understanding the characteristics of online identity discourses. Given the medium's *accessibility, anonymity, reach, contingency,* and *popularity*, online identity discourses constructed in interactively by random readers have unique features that make them valuable qualitative data for the study of particular groups of people such as the Chinese overseas.

An ethnic quarter in the global cyber public sphere. The common use of Chinese language and accessibility of the website combine to determine a sense of ethnic membership among Chinese individuals who are far from the homeland and scattered around the world. The individuals in this group constitute the target population within which I will explore the concept of Chinese identity overseas. Although it is reasonable to expect that they will share some identity traits, they are also expected to perform a variety of discourses in their public and voluntary

commentaries on digested media messages as well as in discussions with other online users.

Presentation, representation, and re-presentation. Even in anonymity, a random online commentator can still reveal some aspects of his or her identity. Such enactment, though apparently contingent when observed as part of a group, is still a meaningful discursive act because of the message creator's communicative intentionality. Since most of the messages under investigation are the commentators' reactions to news digests or other users' comments, the presentation of cultural identity becomes a re-presentation that results from the interaction between self and others in this group.

Identity enactment and manifestation. The framework described above is informed by a set of assumptions or premises that will guide textual analysis and interpretation of identification among the population studied.

- 1) The structure of cultural identity is constituted by four interrelated properties, which produce the multiple dimensions of identity and can crystallize into forms of identification such as national, professional, racial, political, and economic identity.
- 2) The distinctive context of the website poses limitations to interpersonal and social interaction such as face consideration. For instance, one might argue that the anonymity of cyberspace can lead to phony and mendacious messages; however, the texts also may

convey truthful feelings, attitudes, and preferences of their anonymous creators.

- 3) Although frames and agendas embedded in the editorial selection of news stories and commentaries inevitably influence the commentators, the latter have the freedom, capacity, and discretion to respond with their independent thoughts and genuine feelings.
- 4) Most, if not all, online commentators live in globalized, postcolonial, and multicultural surroundings, which is expected to have an influence on their self identification.
- 5) The study of cultural identification among diasporic Chinese is expected to lead to the analysis of internal heterogeneity and multiplicity of group identities.

As indicated in the review of literature and the proposed integrative framework for interpretation, the current project explores the online enactment of cultural identification among Chinese overseas through an interpretive perspective informed by identity theories developed in intercultural communication studies. The interpretive framework to be used will guide the selection and analysis of data. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on these methodological issues and describe the procedures and criteria of data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

A main assumption of this research is that an analysis of textual data can illuminate the cultural heterogeneity of the targeted group as well as how processes of identification take place through discursive interaction. This chapter focuses on the discussion of research design, including research method employed, general research procedures (description of the Web site, data collection, and sampling), and strategies of data analysis. As discussed in Chapter I and II, the current study examines cultural identification or identity practices manifested in messages produced by COOCs in a particular website operated outside China. Hence, this research focuses on a volume of textual messages comprising news stories, opinion pieces, and personal blog entries. Prior to the description of sampling strategies, general research procedures, and analytical strategies, I present research questions, definitions of the key concepts, and discussion of grounded theory as the method employed.

Research questions

Over years of being a loyal user of the website studied as well as a member of the target community, I have observed the complexity of cultural identification enacted in textual and visual messages posted by COOCs. The central research purpose, as elaborated in Chapter I, is to gain a systematic understanding of such complexity via the lens of cultural identity theory. Upon approaching this research objective, this study should provide answers to the following set of research questions.

RQ1: How do Chinese individuals living overseas use online communication to construct a sense of identity in the context of intercultural interaction abroad?

RQ1a: How does the immediate multicultural living environment influence identification processes?

RQ1b: How does global politics influence identification processes?

RQ2: What does online discourse reveal about the dynamics of cultural identification among the Chinese in the diaspora?

RQ2a: What are the most salient points of convergence within the group?

RQ2b: What are the most salient internal divisions within the group?

RQ3: What does online communication reveal about the complex interrelations among the dimensions of identity?

Definition of Key Concepts

To analyze the textual data, I draw on several key concepts commonly used in intercultural, media, and critical studies. The data selection criteria and analytical strategies are set in close reference of these concepts.

Culture. For the purpose of this research, culture is defined here as a historically rooted and shared system of values and norms that allow for the grouping people into large communities distinguished by group membership (nation/state), social categorization (race/ethnicity), self-identification (role/position), and/or ideological preferences (values/worldview)

Cultural identity and identification. Cultural identity is defined as one's self concept formed and performed in communication that emphasizes one's connection to cultural membership. Situate in culture, the concept of cultural identity can also be described as a cluster of subjectivities that relate to various dimensions of an individual's experience as a member of a group. Cultural identification is the enactment of cultural identity. In the conceptualization of identity, culture is the central core of the cluster, connecting the sense of individuality, sociality, spirituality, and materiality to form the individual's self-perception. In the current study of cultural identity, the performance of the dimensions of cultural identity is assumed to be situational and subject to individual willful enactment, which can be manifested in discourse practices such as posting online commentaries. Such process of online communication is approached here as one kind of cultural identification with its own rules and rituals.

Chinese overseas. Chinese overseas is a broad term, hard to define in a strict and absolute way because of its rich connotation and often contesting, ambiguous meanings. In its most basic meaning, Chinese overseas would mean any Chinese individual living outside China. However, an ethnic Chinese who has been naturalized in another nation and travels back inside China with a passport issued by another country is also a Chinese overseas or more precisely an overseas Chinese. As for the use of this term in the current study, Chinese overseas are defined as those who access and interact through the selected website, which is effectively blocked and banned in

Mainland China. About the constitution of Chinese overseas as a group, I will elaborate more in the section discussing research procedures.

Global, multicultural, and post-colonial context. Any communication act of cultural identification cannot escape the influence of global, multicultural, and post-colonial contexts. Coming out of China, through international travel, the Chinese enter a social milieu that inevitably makes them think more globally. In many cities, Chinese overseas enter in interactions with many other racial/ethnic groups (Wickberg, 2008). Immersion in the multicultural surroundings can alter the Chinese overseas' perceptions of social, racial, ethnic, and cultural distinctions that at first may be startling to them. Furthermore, with increased awareness of colonial legacies and post-colonial ideologies – or the rethinking and rectifying of negative legacies of colonialism (Barker & Hulme, 1994; Chrisman & Parry, 2000) – acquired in the global and multicultural environment, Chinese overseas may develop new lenses for the political understanding of international dynamics. Among the online messages analyzed, this awareness of post-colonial ideology is indeed evident. Thus, international experience, intercultural contacts, and critical social learning seem to shape the global, multicultural, and post-colonial social environment that serves as the context for online cultural identification.

Cyber ethnic quarter. Like a real-life living area of an ethnic community submerged in and distinct from a surrounding mainstream culture, a cyber ethnic quarter is a space organized, clustered, and visited by members of an ethnic

community – only that this has a virtual instead of physical location (even though the data might be material stored in a server). A cyber ethnic quarter is like an online ethnic agora designed and operated for the exchange of information, opinion, emotion, and artwork in all sorts of hypertexts and digitalized visual and acoustic formats sustained by Internet technologies (Mitra, 2002). Although the site exists in cyberspace, it does have a physical operating location – ChinaGate Group located in Fremont, California, according to the website’s own description. Although the accessibility of a cyber ethnic quarter could be unbounded, the one studied here has always been banned since its establishment in 1997 by Mainland China, where the growth of Internet users has been sensational. Such a virtual yet substantial barrier imposed by the current PRC government helps define the researched site and population.

Methods

To describe the clamor of this cyber ethnic quarter and grasp the complexity of Chinese overseas cultural identification, I adopted a qualitative methodology featuring textual analysis to identify and link themes and categories that emerged through the close reading of data. To carry out the qualitative textual analysis, I drew on the coding techniques and basic research procedures developed in grounded theory as originally proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), further developed by Clarke (2005) and Charmaz (2006), and applied in communication studies (Becker & Stamp, 2005; Becker, 1998; Blythe, 2007; Fisher & Hawes, 1971; Gales, 2003; Gilchrist &

Browning, 1981; Martin, 2008; Muylle & Despontin, 1999; Park & Qin, 2007; Right, 1997; Skeat & Perry, 2008; Thompson, 2008). For instance, moving back and forth from specific data to more abstract categories, the current study is not aimed at generating theory but rather interpreting data and elaborating insights to answer the research questions.

Research Procedures

This study started with my own experience as a user of the website and a mindful observer (or “lurker,” in a web term) of the complexity of Chinese cultural identity in today’s global, multicultural, and post-colonial context. Just several months after arriving in the United States, I was introduced to the website Wenxuecity.com (literally translated as “Literature city”), where I could seek information shared by other fellow Chinese on how to survive outside China—for instance, how to apply for credit cards, how to buy or fix computers, how to buy used cars, and where to find sales information. Inevitably, I was also attracted to some online forums set up in the website regarding current political events and tabloid-typed news stories. Gradually the website became the default home site of my personal computer’s Internet browser. I use this website as my main source of news information almost on a daily basis because almost all major current events are covered in this site. Although I seldom participate in the heated debates in some of the popular forums, I have been observing these discussions among registered users, especially after the website added a function that allows users to leave their commentaries on the homepage frontline news stories.

Consequently, I began to develop my research interest in analyzing the complexity of Chinese cultural identity manifested through these messages so as to gain a thorough and systematic understanding of cultural identification processes as enacted through new forms of communication technologies.

A description of the website. According to its self-description, Wenxuecity.com, founded in the United States in 1997, is “The Largest Portal Site for Overseas Chinese Worldwide,” a user-centered global website providing “theme browsing, web navigating, overseas authorship, news tracking, free services, and electronic commerce and so on” (my translation from Chinese) and targeting the market of overseas Chinese worldwide. It can be inferred that the founder(s), designers, and operators of this site were probably from Mainland China. The principal clue leading to such an inference is language encoding. The general setting is in Chinese language with two optional encodings: Traditional Chinese and Simplified Chinese. The PRC developed and adopts the Simplified Chinese writing system that is repelled by the Republic of China (POC) in Taiwan. While the language encodings of the general setting are optional, the page “About us”—containing the company’s mission statement and some self-promotion—is a mosaic picture seamlessly composed of 40 smaller pictures all in GIF format, which contains only the Simplified Chinese language. There is no way for common users to switch the Simplified Chinese on the “About us” into the Traditional Chinese encoding. From any computer with Chinese language encodings (Simplified or Traditional), the first-

time opening the website shows the Chinese words encoded in the Simplified Chinese.

This also indicates that a selective priority was definitely given to the Simplified Chinese, which would be rejected by Taiwanese Chinese and seldom adopted by Chinese other than the Mainlanders (Singaporean Chinese is in simplified Chinese and is an exception to this estimation). The website also states information about the “Target Demographic,” including gender (72% male), education (73% holding master’s degrees or higher), age (73% between ages 25-35), locations (73% in the U.S.), and average duration of an individual’s daily visit to the site (26 minutes).

Many of the messages in the website’s self-description seem directed at potential advertisers, which reveal the commercial, profit-seeking initiative and motive of those who run this website.

The homepage of wenxuecity.com, relatively stable in its format, is composed of numerous online forums and users’ weblogs. On the homepage, there are three main sections in a hierarchical order – News Express, Hot Forums, and Best Weblogs, which are surrounded by visual images of various advertisements. The hierarchical positioning of the three main sections shows that the website is designed primarily as a news portal. As one of the 80 various forums on the homepage, News Express is given a prominent position on the homepage with 60 concise and trundling headlines (each headline is only one line in length) in two columns—about 10 percent of space is given to advertisements in slightly different colors. Every headline is a link to a webpage containing the content of the news. At the bottom of every news story,

readers can check commentaries by clicking the link or post new comments after logging in. All the comments left by registered users are also in a separate webpage and vertically placed in a timely order (older postings would be placed in lower position). The discourses under investigation are mostly in these commentary pages.

Besides target audience, the number and quality of readers' comments were the main factors for selecting wenxuecity.com as a prime site for the current study. Compared to numerous other Chinese websites, wenxuecity.com has many noticeable advantages that attract more elaborate comments from a more diverse group of readers (for a list of snapshots of other overseas Chinese websites please see appendix). First, wenxuecity.com overtly adopts an eclectic (inclusive) editorial orientation in order to appeal a larger and broader Chinese reading audience. Second, the posting procedure is user-friendly and accessible for commentators. To register or log in is relatively easy. What a commentator needs is only a viable email account. This helps avoid flooding of superfluous messages and allows anonymous commentators to post their messages swiftly. All contents of all postings are open to any unregistered users. Third, the commercial content of the website is moderate and restrained, providing ample room for information and opinion sharing. Fourth, although the reliability and credibility of news reproduced are questionable, a cross-examination of some translated, digested news stories with their original sources showed a significant degree of faithfulness to the original content. To get to know current events, this site with second-hand and even third- or fourth-hand news

accounts could be a fair starting point for further exploration by readers. The Internet helps make such second-hand news stories available to readers nearly in synchrony with the original accounts.

Since wenxuecity.com does not have its own news reporting staff, most of the news stories reproduced are digested, translated, and compiled from other sources, which have a great variety, including many from mainstream media in Chinese, English, Japanese, French, German, Korean, Spanish, and a few other languages. Chinese sources are preponderant, exceeding all other sources. The majority of Chinese sources are from major news agencies in Mainland China, such as Xinhua news agency, *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, and *Nanfang Daily*. A large number of Chinese sources are from Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and other news agencies outside Mainland China. While most of the English-language sources are mainstream news agencies such as United Press International, Reuters, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Financial Times*, the articles are actually translated into Chinese by often unnamed translators belonging to Chinese media agencies specialized in reporting international news, such as Global Times and International Herald Leader.

Although described by Wikipedia.com (Wenxuecity, July 2011) as a “site that mainly collects gossip and rumors,” Wenxuecity.com posts a large portion of serious commentaries and critical news, especially in times when some major events happen. On all major events, such as the Virginia Tech shooting, the Beijing Olympic Torch

Relay, and presidential elections, this site usually would have serious coverage. The design of the trundling headlines on the homepage suggests the website's intention to cater the interest of the imagined readership on timely coverage. Since most serious news stories originate in mainstream media outlets, the news reports can be reliable and easily corroborated. Because of the swiftness of the Internet, the site sometimes can report breaking news ahead of regular print and television news. Of course, the general content of the news forum may be an important factor that attracts and retains website users who may or may not leave their commentaries.

Sampling process. The sampling of data is a dynamic process that includes observation, collection, and selection. In observation, I immersed myself as a user of the website, browsing news stories, reader commentaries, and other postings on a daily basis. My research interest developed through such personal experience. This media-watch behavior not only kept me well informed but also became the initial step to locate what might be meaningful. My deliberate observation started in the spring of 2004 when I began to collect news stories, records of online discussions, and reader commentaries from this website. My memo-writing started during 2005, when I was engaged in writing a paper about identity construction in one of the site's forums on current events. In spring 2007, the data-collection became more purposeful. The collection of data followed this pattern: browsing headlines; selecting news stories plus related reader commentaries according to the criteria discussed below; storing specific webpage of news content and commentary pages. The procedure for data

storage included copying and pasting the textual content in text documents and saving them as html document (for pages with embedded visuals).

For sampling of data, I developed the following criteria:

1. A focus on news stories about China, Chinese people, and Chinese cultures, and readers' commentaries on such news;
2. Preference was given to news and commentaries that relate to themes such as intercultural experiences and sojourner lives, which led to the identification of content with focus on ideological conflicts, historical perspectives, social, racial, and ethnic stereotypes, and other issues relevant to the cultural identification of Chinese in a global, multicultural, and post-colonial context.
3. Preference was given to commentaries on news stories that originated in sources other than Chinese media, especially those from English-speaking or other Western cultures.
4. Preference was given to the news stories that generated the higher number of reader's commentaries.
5. Exclusion of all "junk food news," including information promoting products, sexual titillations, celebrity news, gossip and rumors.

Based on these criteria, I accumulated over 600 news stories and over 5,000 commentaries. The earliest archival of news date back to January 1, 2003. In this collection over a period of more than four years, I did: 1) perusing the selected news

stories and corresponding commentaries; 2) conducting preliminary analysis; 3) writing initial memos for those most noticeable; 4) forming preliminary categorization strategies. This was an ongoing process, so new entries were continuously adding to this collection until December 2010, when the first draft of the last analytical chapter was completed.

This preliminary data collection underwent further sampling to reduce the volume and refine the scope of a manageable data set for analysis. The criteria for selecting readers' commentaries and news were closely related to three interrelated main themes that emerged from my preliminary analysis: 1) Global politics (international relations, political criticism against PRC government, Cross-Strait relationships, Tibet, Xinjiang, etc); 2) Multicultural lives (cultural shock experience, cultural accommodation and adaption, racial and ethnic awareness, ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudices, cultural hybridity, and immigration or naturalization); 3) Post-colonial perspectives (Westernization, colonial history, Huagong or Coolies, Chinese exclusion, post-colonial ideology, emancipation and empowerment). After applying these criteria, a selection of 120 news and 1,500 commentaries constituted the data for further analysis.

The population - COOCs. The definition of the population studied is based on the authorship of online commentaries, which is part of the target readership of the website. The authors of the postings, labeled here Chinese overseas online commentators or COOCs, are mostly anonymous commentators of news events. Due

to the website's eclectic editorial orientation and apparent priority to content related more to the PRC, it is estimated that the majority of COOCs is from mainland China. This group may contain Chinese overseas who are students, professionals (including those who were once students but stayed abroad after graduation), personnel working in Chinese embassies or consulates, spouses and dependents, and other types of visitors or travelers. According to United Nations Education, Science, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2006), China leads the world in sending students overseas – 14 percent of all students studying abroad worldwide are from China. The majority of Chinese students overseas are graduate students. As a graduate student myself, I was able to find out that Wenxuecity.com is indeed very popular in the circle of Chinese graduate students attending the same university. Besides students and professionals with working visas, an important portion of this population is those who have permanent residency or even citizenship in the host countries. In a strict sense, these are the ethnic Chinese in host cultures. Who would be more likely to post or to post what kinds of messages from what kinds of identity positions – those who are newcomers or those who have been more tenured and more successful in their survival as sojourners – is an arguable and testable question that is beyond the scope of the current study. However, personal experiences and economic conditions are definitive contextual factors that affect the online identity practices and constrain their communicative behavior. In only a few cases, commentators seemed to be non-Chinese, who might have been Chinese language learners and whose messages were

analyzed. COOCs can represent a population defined as Chinese residing outside China who actively use the Chinese language in cyberspace.

Analytical strategies

Based on the integrated framework informed by three primary intercultural communication scholars' cultural identity studies, the current study adopted a qualitative textual analysis methodology that features tactics for data collection as well as tools for data analysis developed by grounded theorists (Charmaz, 2005; Strauss, 1987). Employing the "constant comparative method," the current study follows a qualitative research protocol that focuses on close, constant, and comparative readings of data to render concepts, categories, and their connections, which synergies form inductive and local theories (Charmaz, 2006).

In the current study, the analytical process was divided into three phases. In Phase one, a three-stage coding process was applied to the selected data (in three broad thematic categories of perceptual cultural differences, multicultural lives, and global politics respectively), including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this phase, the data examined was placed in emerging categories (open coding), with conceptual interrelationships (axial coding, the four identity dimensions, for instance) explored and identified and then systematically related with the core concepts – cultural identity and identification (selective coding, such as the three kinds of cultural identification as represented by the three analytical chapters). Phase two included an interpretive examination of data

via the framework of cultural identity introduced at the end of Chapter Two. In this phase, commentaries on specific news events are sorted out to illustrate the concepts and relationships among them that are part of the framework of cultural identity. In Phase three, theoretical insights resulting from grounded theory analysis were further elaborated. To be noted, the three-phase analytical procedure indicates only a basic and general process. Going back and forth over the phases occurred oftentimes.

On phase two, as elaborated in Chapter Two, an interpretive framework integrating concepts from established intercultural communication theories on identity and identification (Carbaugh, Collier, and Hecht) was used as the primary analytical strategy. In this framework, cultural identity is communicative, multidimensional, and dynamic. Online commentary messages are produced by individual commentators, whose life realities vary over two binary tensions (individuality-sociality, materiality-spirituality) and generally converge at their common Chinese cultural membership and position toward China's place in the global context. It is the two dimensional dialectics and crystalline structure of that distinguishes this integrated model from established literature on cultural identity represented by Carbaugh, Collier, and Hecht. This is a dialectical model because the characteristics of cultural identification by individuals can be represented in the two pairs of dialectical tensions and their rotations – individuality to sociality and materiality to spirituality. To sort out and interpret the variety of identity messages from the researched textual data, the allotment of the four kinds of life realities crisscrossed in two dimensional dialectics

and converged at common cultural membership served as the basic coding within each of the three thematic categories of cultural identification. See Chapter Two for examples of axial coding from the integrated model of cultural identity.

The following chapters present the findings of this investigation, organized in relation to the research questions stated above.

**CHAPTER IV: ENCOUNTERING MULTICULTURALISM:
IDENTIFICATION THROUGH PERCEPTION OF CULTURAL
DIFFERENCES**

In this chapter, I explore how Chinese overseas online commentators (COOCs) interpret the multicultural differences they encounter in global cities and thus enact processes of cultural identification. More specifically, this chapter focuses on examining: 1) what are the interpretive strategies employed by users of Wenxuecity.com to make sense of perceived cultural differences in their multicultural realities, 2) what are the salient categories of cultural difference that provoke discussion among members of the virtual, diasporic community, and 3) what does online discourse reveal about the dynamic interplay of self and other in cultural identification among members of this virtual community. Cultural identity is defined here as one's self-concept formed and performed in communication that emphasizes one's connection to cultural membership. Cultural identification is the enactment of cultural identity, a process that features the interplay of “looking-in” or self-perception and “looking-out” or other-perception. Both self perception and other perception then contribute to the complex and dynamic process of identity formation.

The data analyzed show that Chinese online commentators opened up their senses to absorb sharp cultural differences that emanated from the particular national contexts in which they lived. This opening up to difference often led to a comparison of cultures as the main interpretive strategy through which Chinese online

commentators revealed their conceptions of self and others and affirmed a sense of identification with their own culture as well as the host cultures. The discussion of findings is organized around the identification of the categories of cultural difference framing online discourse that elicited the most commentary: race and ethnicity, gender, personal attributes of the Chinese, and nationality. Each of these general categories was articulated in online discourse through discussion of particular issues of interest to COOCs, such as repatriation, discrimination against Chinese individuals in Western societies, or stereotypes of Chinese masculinity and Chinese students in Western universities. The analysis of these data revealed that interpretations of self and other cultures are most often constructed through comparative characterizations of Chinese and non-Chinese groups and their cultural practices. Through comparison, commentators locate themselves in the social and cultural landscapes of their adopted nations and address the meaning of cultural and power inequalities in the negotiation of the individual, social, spiritual, and material dimensions of their identity.

The online discourse about cultural differences analyzed in this chapter suggests a particular dynamic of cultural identification that I have labeled perceptual cultural identification. In this form of identification, COOCs enact a sense of cultural membership through comparison between self and other in a process that is driven by the exchange of information and heuristic interpretation of perceived differences rather than the by the need to take any strategic action or assume ideological positions. Thus, subjects are engrossed with making sense of differences and are motivated to

exchange cultural knowledge so as to react to negative representations of Chinese culture and peoples with a positive affirmation of identity or to reduce the uncertainty inevitably felt in intercultural contexts.

Comparing Cultures as an Interpretive Strategy

Cultural identity is, in part, the development of a self-concept through cultural comparison. According to Cooley's notion of "looking-glass self" (Cooley, 1902, cited in Rogers, 1997, p. 153), people strive to develop their sense of self in constant comparison to others and by revealing how they think they are viewed by others. Through the comparison of cultures, people in intercultural contexts can acquire knowledge about the new society they have come to inhabit and, at the same time, strengthen their self-awareness at the individual and group levels. This cultural knowledge and self-awareness can help reduce the uncertainty that is often felt by people in intercultural contexts. Comparison, in the context of intercultural interaction, can be result of different types of direct or indirect contact: from personal, interpersonal, and impersonal interaction to mediated, public, organizational, and institutional interactions (Carbaugh, 1990; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Halualani, 2008; Stephen & Stephen, 1992). In any context, direct or indirect intercultural contact affects the perceptions of self, one of the core dimensions of identity (Halualani, 2008).

Comparison of cultures is indeed a pervasive interpretive strategy across categories of difference and topics of discussion in the website studied. Arguable, this

tendency may indicate the influence of the Chinese maxim “Expertise comes from comparison,” a maxim well known across generations of Chinese and repeated like a cultural credo. As understood in Chinese culture, comparison is a way to achieve *Zhenzhi Zhuojian* or “real knowledge and true insight,” so as to transcend limitations caused by absence of common sense and to reduce uncertainty in a new environment. Among Chinese online commentators, comparison is a common strategy to make sense of cultural differences they encounter. The data suggest that COOCs use two main orientations in cultural comparison: one that stresses the opposition between Chinese and other cultures, and another that downplays and trivializes cultural differences.

Cultural comparison through opposition emphasizes confrontational dynamics—often posed as binary oppositions—between cultures and cultural practices. From this perspective, cultures, groups, or individuals are understood primarily in terms of conflicting social systems, historical evolutions, ideologies, and individual and collective belief systems. Online commentators who stress comparison through opposition are most often the ones who take strong positions on issues discussed or see clear boundaries defining self-other. On the other hand, other commentators in this virtual community make comparisons to downplay cultural difference by attenuating, ignoring, or denying the relevance of difference. Those who downplay cultural difference more stress the necessity of cultural accommodation and reconciliation within the host culture so as to pursue some sense of security in the host

society. These perspective is also one that leads to a sense of fluidity in personal or group identity.

Both types of comparison operate as interpretative strategies through which COOCs articulate positions of identification as Chinese individuals living overseas. In the following section of this chapter, I will provide textual evidence that highlights how website users used cultural comparison in the context of the particular issues and topics debated. In the third section of this chapter, the focus will shift to the discussion of how online discourse relates to the positions of identification enacted in this particular community.

Salient Categories of Cultural Difference: Race, Nationality, and Gender

In this section, I identify three categories of cultural difference salient in online discourse and within which COOCs make sense of who they are: race, nationality, and gender. These broader categories, as the evidence below will show, are not mutually exclusive, since references to race may intersect discussions of gender or nationality. However, I selected these three as most salient because they function most often as central or dominant categories that structure the flow of online discussion on cultural difference, with other categories incorporated as secondary frames of interpretation depending of the particular topic or issue discussed.

Race and Ethnicity: Finding a Place in the Racial Order

Chinese individuals living in multicultural cities outside China are often struck by the racial and ethnic diversity of the societies they inhabit. They strive to

understand the implications of racial difference and to find their place in the existing racial orders (Sun, 2005; Wickberg, 2007). Dealing with racial and ethnic differences is a salient aspect of an individual's process of cultural identification, particularly in multiracial societies that value diversity. This is particularly challenging for Chinese individuals coming from a society often characterized as racially homogenous. China, the most populated nation in the world, is considered a racially homogeneous society in which the social, economic, and political/ideological classification of peoples relates more to regional origins and ethnic backgrounds than to racial distinctions (Befu, 1993; Dikötter, 1992; Sautman, 1994). For most Chinese students in China, discussions about race are generally limited to a brief introduction to Western colonialism and racial conflicts in other countries as topics in world history classes. Therefore, it is not surprising to find Chinese online commentators struggling to make sense of the new racial dynamics encountered in the countries where they reside through heated debates on the website.

In the online commentaries examined, references to race feature bold comparisons that convey racial understandings and perceptions of self and other. In presenting their perceptions of racial and ethnic differences, COOCs enacted their Chinese identity and developed their cultural awareness in a more global and diverse context. In this topic area, comparisons tend to involve the construction of hierarchical racial orders, with a strong emphasis on creating oppositions between groups. Little attention is given to stressing commonality and collaboration among

racial groups, or to downplaying racial and ethnic differences. Overall, the discussion of racial and ethnic differences leads to the articulation of a position of identification among Chinese overseas as disadvantaged in the racial hierarchy. For instance, one commentator perceived the existing racial order in North America as composed of “the Victorious Whites, the Physical(ly competent) Blacks, the Freaky Hispanics, the Depressed Natives, and the forever Alienated Asians” (Mao Yan Kan Ren, 2009)

One particularly animated exchange will be used here as example of these dynamics of racial identification. In a posting titled “A Canadian (Chinese) immigrant’s viewpoint: Where do the Chinese fall short of Whites?” (Mao Yan Kan Ren, March 10, 2009), a commentator listed the good qualities of the White people he or she had encountered in two years of living in Canada as a new immigrant. The list included morality, honesty, fairness, law-abidingness, cooperativeness, politeness, intelligence, and personal hygiene. The same writer then asserted that Chinese people fell way short of Whites in quality of character. This posting generated numerous commentaries, many of which placed the “Victorious Whites” under scrutiny and attributed their success to an innate hypocrisy. Critical responses to this commentator fueled a debate about White, Chinese, and other groups. The writer of the article in favor of Whites was even labeled the “Chinese White Supremacist” by another commentator. Others replied that limited experience living abroad blinded the article’s “naïve” writer from knowing the true nature of Whites. These commentators used personal experience and the same type of comparison by opposition to refute the

claim that “Whites are morally better than the Chinese” and other races, with comments like: “You either haven’t seen true White people or haven’t truly seen White people,” or:

What honesty and credibility? That is simply because you haven’t been fooled by White people or you just haven’t found that you’re fooled by the White. White people are great deceivers. They can deceive you and still make you believe it is your fault. (Commentary to Mao Yan Kan Ren, March 10, 2009)

One commentator mentions that one white friend who owned a construction company only hired Mexicans because his former white workers were too lazy and nitpicking (Mao Yan Kan Ren, March 10, 2009). The critical commentators also offered admonitory advice, suggesting that it takes time to recognize the hypocrisy of White people – “Need more years, then you will learn to see through the color and sense their true nature” (Mao Yan Kan Ren, March 10, 2009).

In another forum about a comment made by US President Barack Obama in defense of his friend and Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, when Gates was arrested in front of his own home, some of the reactions made reference to the character of African Americans in contrast to that of the Chinese (Zhou Guo Wang, July 24, 2009). In the eyes of some commentators, aggression and outspokenness constitute the African Americans’ “audacity,” as in comments like: “(Blacks are) bold and brazen and tend to easily accuse others of racial discrimination whenever needed” (commentary to Zhou Guo Wang, July 24, 2009). Some commentators appear to appreciate the perceived direct, forceful communication style of Black Americans then to turn attention to the idea that the Chinese lack such ability. For instance, one

commentator stated that:

A Black [person] could become the [U.S.] President because Black people are so outspoken and dare to speak out for their own interests – so much unlike the Chinese, who can only whisper to complain behind the back and under the scene (commentary to Zhou Guo Wang, July 24, 2009).

The same commentator argued that such audacity helps cultivate the Black political forces, deterring the dominant Whites who “are so afraid of Blacks and have no other method but give way to accommodate them” (commentary to Zhou Guo Wang, July 24, 2009). But then the commentator pointed out that “awe and fear” is not true respect and won’t be “until Blacks win the genuine social respect in the U.S.” In response to this, another commentator suggested that Chinese in U.S. society share this “awe and fear” of African Americans with the dominant White groups. In comments like these, commentators reproduced racist, stereotypical opinions of Blacks as physically superior but intellectually inferior persons who rely on intimidation rather than reason in their “audacity.” At the same time, they characterized the Chinese as having the same fearful reaction to African Americans as white European Americans.

As the examples above illustrate, these comments about race entail a comparison of Chinese groups with the dominant White or Black race that leads to an affirmation of Chinese identity. In other instances, the commentaries involve the inclusion of the Chinese in the category of people of color. This categorization not only illustrates enduring prejudices but also the uneasiness of Chinese commentators as they try to locate themselves and to establish connections to other non-White racial

groups. In one example, commentators responding to a news story about how black South Africans protested their government's classification of Chinese individuals as "colored" people (Zhou Xin Wang, July 5, 2008), one commentator claimed that "colorless Chinese are transparent, existing but invisible." In another instance, commentators who responded to the news about new proofs that some American Indians might be the heirs of ancient Chinese Yin people who migrated across the Bering Strait declared that the efforts of Chinese scholars to find new evidence about the genetic links between ancient Chinese and modern American Indians are just "sheer acts of will" or "one-sided love" (commentary to He Nan Shang Bao, September 3, 2009). Their view is based on the assumption that Indians do not like to be associated with the Chinese because the commentator never heard such thing, and in real life he or she never met Indians who had special interests in China or Chinese culture.

Likewise, on the topic of racial miscegenation, commentators expressed a sense of that invisibility and marginalization. For instance, in a forum about hybrid celebrities (Chao Xian Ri Bao, Oct 2, September 3, 2008), some commentators regret that personalities such as Tiger Woods, whose parents both have one fourth Chinese decent; Sean Paul, whose mother is Chinese; and Keanu Reeves, whose father is Hawaiian Chinese, would never identify themselves with their Chinese heritages for some reason. Commentators seem to feel singled out and at a disadvantage among other racial groups.

Another popular topic that led to debate was the comparison of how Westerners are treated in China and how Chinese living in foreign countries are treated. For instance, in one of such discussions, Chinese online commentators called Westerners in China “white trash,” since they perceived that foreigners from more developed countries who go to China for career opportunities do so because they are failures in their own nations (Di Hua, July 23, 2007). On the other hand, commentators viewed themselves as the “elites” who are able to leave China after winning a series of scholastic or professional competitions. This view is, perhaps, echoing the Chinese proverb “People climb high while water flows low.” In this case, such perspective relates to the belief that going to China for career opportunities is against the rule of moving upward since China is perceived as being in a lower position (socially and topographically) than the West. On the other hand, having a career and obtaining citizenship in Western nations like the U.S. is a sign of success. The reason why “those who are already US nationals are wasting time in China,” one commentator surmised, was because they could not function well socially and psychologically in the developed, industrial nations. So the white “trash” goes to China to repair their impaired dignity and to seek lost opportunities (commentary to Di Hua, July 23, 2007).

Even though foreign nationals in China may be labeled “trash” by some Chinese online commentators, they acknowledged that foreigners are treated with reverence by the Chinese inside China (Di Hua, July 23, 2007). This point led to the

complaint that even though Chinese overseas are “elites,” their treatment in other countries is comparatively unfavorable, like “secondary citizens.” This opposition between “trash” foreigners revered in China and “elite” Chinese facing prejudice against them in other countries baffled some commentators and fueled their cultural identification as disadvantaged or marginalized.

In sum, these comparisons, often drawing on stereotypical and prejudiced generalizations about racial groups, exemplify how some Chinese online commentators assumed a position of identification in a foreign context, stressing cultural opposition to articulate their sense of being marginalized or kept in a lower social status in their new societies. In this category, consensus rather than internal division dominated the online discussion. Simultaneously, through polarized generalizations—as in the description of others as “trash” and self as “elite”—some commentators asserted their perception of the disadvantaged socioeconomic reality of their country of origin in comparison to that of Western nations. In their discourse, living standards and career opportunities in China do not match those of Western countries, a reason why they seek to relocate outside China in the first place.

Yet, the discussion of racial relations in their new societies allowed commentators to develop an understanding of the unequal power relations among cultural groups labeled by ethnic or racial origin. And although Chinese online commentators seemed to see themselves in a position of disadvantage as an ethnic group, they seldom identified themselves with ethnic minorities and peoples of color.

In general, they tended to identify more often with the dominant racial group. They believed or perceived the White dominant group as the one establishing the norms or the rules of the game. As “elites,” they believed such alignment was not only realistic but normal because they have been game winners in China and strive to continue winning and enriching their track-records. Winning as an ideology, as illustrated in the characterization—“victorious Whites” cited above—was expressed in the comments of online commentators who tended to accept hegemonic racial structures in host cultures and stress their individuality in their cultural survival. In the game of cultural competition, some are winners and some turn out to be underdogs. When individualistic gain becomes an ideology, it is easier to take the norms, rules, and laws for granted and be oblivious of the possibility of overturning the system. In this respect, Chinese overseas online commentators did not identify themselves with poor immigrants, including fellow Chinese who enter and stay illegally, in the global migration flow.

Resisting Gender Stereotypes: On Chinese Masculinity

Online debates on how Chinese men are viewed by Westerners constituted another topic area that generated poignant reactions among commentators. In particular, the characterization of Chinese men as physically weak and lacking sex appeal generated an animated debate. As research has suggested, comments on the characteristics of a particular group from an outgroup critic can evoke cultural identification practices among ingroup members (Hornsey et al, 2002; Tajfel & Turner,

1979). Further, some studies have supported the hypothesis that members of a group are more sensitive to and defensive of outgroup criticism than of ingroup criticism (Hornsey et al, 2004). On the topic of gender, the debates stemmed primarily in reaction to outgroup critics and illustrate how commentators struggled to make sense of aspects of their cultural identity revealed in the eyes of non-Chinese critics.

Research has also shown that negative physical stereotypes against Chinese as an ethnic group are prevalent in media (Wang & Cooper-Chen, 2009). Contesting such stereotypes can be difficult and even taboo in daily, face-to-face interactions with others. However, in the anonymous online environment, the debate on stereotypes is open and extensive. For the purpose of illustration, I selected three articles featured in the website that elicited intense debate among commentators. The articles include one titled “Chinese men in the eyes of 100 Western women” originally published in the magazine *Oriental Weekly of the Outlook* (a popular Chinese political magazine) (Da Yang Wang, Aug 11, 2007); the second one was titled “Why would so few Western women marry Chinese men?” (Zong He Xin Wen, Feb 25, 2007); the third was titled “Can Chinese men subdue foreign women?” (Li, Dec 21, 2008). These pieces focused on how Westerners, particularly Western women, view Chinese men. The central message in the articles reinforced the view of Chinese men as undersexed and physically weak. They refer to the image of Chinese men as short in stature, physically weak, with limited sex appeal, and, therefore, charmless and unattractive to Western women. Reactions from online commentators included both agreement with

and contestation of the stereotype. Many did not deny the stereotype and accepted Chinese men's sexual disadvantage (compared to white and black men) and physical incompetence as the-fact-of-the-matter in their responses. Dissenters, on the other hand, rejected the attributes and treated them as unfounded prejudice against the Chinese. Regardless of positions, the comments tend to shift the focus from collective body image to individual traits and personal strategies to maintain the mental health of Chinese men.

For example, commentators who reaffirmed the stereotype did so with different arguments. Some placed Chinese men in a low position in an imagined racialized sexual order. One commentator delineated a U-shaped model to designate a so-called "racial masculine hierarchy," with Asian males at the bottom and Blacks and Whites on the top of each apex. Other commentators agreed with such racialized hierarchy by claiming that the differences have been proved empirically, statistically, and objectively in many scientific investigations—but provided no concrete reference to such evidence.

Other commentators who did not challenge the stereotype cited evolutionary processes. For example, some saw the basis for the stereotype in the evolution of the human race and the social development of different civilizations. They treated Chinese masculinity as a phenomenon linked to the early civilization of Chinese culture. For instance, one stated:

... the Chinese are the earliest civilized; the genetic heritage was determined by social status rather than sexuality . . . unlike European and African ancient

counterparts, who practiced cluster marriages where only men with longer phalluses and more sex drive could guarantee their sperm would get through the female genital tract and reach the uterus (commentary to Li, Dec 21, 2008).

From this view, Chinese culture was civilized too early, and the more civilized society—with more a complex stratified social structure—the less effective the natural selection and, therefore, the sexual competence. This type of interpretation also implied that Western societies are less civilized than China, indicating a kind of ethnocentrism.

Along the same lines, other cultural factors were cited to explain the perception that Chinese men were undersexed. For instance, one COOC stated that as an “old” nation, China had always promoted literacy and courtesy rather than physical education and sexuality. Another writer observed that in Chinese classic literature and historical records, men or women with super sexual power and overt, exuberant sex drive are antagonistic figures, despised by generations of Chinese because Chinese culture values brain power much more than physical power. From this view, culture had affected the genetic evolution in producing an undersexed race. According to these commentators, the particular dynamics of Chinese culture enable male individuals who are over canny, scheming, calculating, restrained, imperturbable, and timid while casting out those who are passionate, liberal, bold, ambitious, adventurous, and aggressive. Arguably, by blaming culture and tradition, these commentators alleviated the pressure on the individual and shifted attention to culture and history. In addition to providing cultural explanations to make sense of the stereotype, these commentators provided culturally grounded principles of ideal manhood as a strategy

to cope with the stereotype. One wrote: “To foster (mental) strength and circumvent (physical) weakness, Asians should exploit more of their brain power and utilize what they are really good at.” Other commentator stated: “Asians work, while Blacks and Whites play; Asians make a living, while Blacks and Whites enjoy life.” Another said: “Chinese men in the U.S. usually have a stronger ability to make a living and a better attitude to live a life,” since physicality and sexuality are not exactly correlated to one’s viability or ability to live a good life. From this view, ideal manhood for Chinese men is contrary to the hedonistic version of Westerners.

Another group of COOCs reaffirmed the stereotype by using sarcasm and self-mocking, claiming that this is a “healthy” way to protect the overall Chinese collective psychology. One suggested: “We need someone who could ridicule our own culture.” Another commentator put it this way: “Oops! Stamp on your tail (or catch you on the row). Couldn’t agree more, I raise my both feet to agree: Small, indeed small.” Another commentator pointed out that the physical and sexual degeneration of Chinese race is the consequence of the heavenly nemesis on the bad behaviors of Chinese male ancestors, who were “addicted to opium, prostitution, concubinage.” Such self-mocking and lightheartedness is a way to ease tensions that still end up reinforcing the stereotype.

These messages show how the assenters of the stereotype positioned their Chinese cultural identity in an inferior position in a racialized order of physicality and sexuality. At the same time, they managed the pressure against Chinese manhood by

separating physical prowess from intellectual and moral aptitudes as alternative criteria for manhood. Their commentaries constructed a virtual community that provided support to their distinct cultural identification in the process of coping with negative attributions in host cultures.

On the other hand, messages that challenged the stereotype were abundant and driven by different interpretations. In general, they denied the factual validity of the sexual stereotype against Chinese men and its correlation to physical strength. The central arguments of objectors explained the stereotype in various ways: as an illusion rather than scientific fact, falsifiable for it can be disproven with easy examples; as the result of faulty common sense; as an image created and reinforced by media and other types of public communication produced with a pro-Western agenda and filtered through a colonial ideology; or a form of prejudice coming from distorted personal or social perception.

For some commentators, this false allegation had been initially fabricated and disseminated by Western colonizers who wanted to rule indigenous peoples in their own lands not only physically but also psychologically—as in the case of the exploitation of African slaves or the marginalization of Chinese laborer in the U.S. As one commentator pointed out, the Chinese as a nonviolent people from a nonviolent culture with minimum outbound violence—such as colonial conquest—in history is likely to be unfairly stereotyped into a view of Chinese men as flimsy and submissive, with feminine traits.

Another type of response appeared to be contesting the stereotype but end up reinforcing sexual and racial stereotypes by focusing on East-West hegemonic struggles. This position proposed a kind of Chauvinist ideology: only winning wars of conquest against the West would completely uproot the Chinese male stereotype. In this view, all Chinese men should, for the sake of Chinese manhood, be prepared to fight for the reestablishment of a world order that favors China and allows for the correction of distorted imagery of Chinese culture. When one commentator questioned the latter reasoning by asking: “What about Black men, who are also victims of colonial conquest and much more oppressed than the Chinese and have been able to successfully establish their ‘supreme’ masculinity in contemporary culture?,” the same commentator further explained that Black men could create a strong manhood because some of their “big” and “capable” representatives have fought their ways to conquer other races individually, interpersonally, and in some public arenas such as sports and entertaining venues, music, and, more directly pornography. In this regard, the same commentator argued that the Chinese only needed some “willing” Chinese “supermen” to show off their manhood and at the same time to avow their Chinese identity at the individual level, instead of relying on international wars to reconstruct Chinese masculinity. These commentators thus challenged the stereotype from the position that White masculinity had indeed been established as superior on the basis of hegemonic power and colonial domination, which represented a systematic, collective violence. The superiority of Black

masculinity, on the other hand, relied on the strength of physical attributes and promotion in media and popular culture, which represented a kind of sporadic, individual aggression. This view reaffirmed the position of blacks and white men as dominant in the sexual hierarchy and assumed that male sexuality relies on aggressive behavior.

Another type of reaction against the stereotype shifted attention to the individual traits of Chinese men or the individual misconceptions of those promoting the stereotype. As one commentator stated, “It’s all about whom the Western women have actually encountered.” In this line of argument, a commentator argued that Western women form the prejudice and spread it just because they may just have happened to experience a relation with small Chinese men who craved Western women in the first place. The writer countered the stereotype by arguing that big Chinese men tend to be more self-restrained and ethnocentric, or culturally conservative, and thus less attracted to Western women and more attracted to women at home.

One commentator argued: “Male Chinese overseas are generally less attractive than those in China.” Another echoed this idea with a historical claim:

Historically, Chinese coolies compelled or cajoled to leave their homeland to be cheap laborers in colonial territories were almost unexceptionally from the Southern coastal provinces such as Fujian and Guangdong, where the natives were normally shorter, smaller, and less physically competent than those from the North . . . Modern Chinese overseas students are mostly nerds, bookish, lacking of physical training, and unable to represent the real Chinese manhood (commentary to Zong He Xin Wen, Feb 25, 2007).

In this case, commentators attempted to deal with prejudice by engaging in a kind of

internal self-loathing that sacrifices the dignity of a subgroup of Chinese men. These spontaneous and candid responses reveal, to some degree, how eager Chinese commentators want to get rid of the stereotype to assert pride in being Chinese. Underscoring individual differences among Chinese men and highlighting Western women's inclination to over-generalize is a way to rationalize their predicament and to strengthen their Chinese cultural core.

In sum, with the exception of the example of internal division presented above, COOCs generally identified themselves as a cohesive group that has been singled out for negative characterization by outsiders. They tended to identify themselves with Chinese culture in a gesture of spectatorship, cheering or booing as they accepted, rejected or rethought the stereotype constructed by others in Western culture. Using comparison through opposition and regardless of their acceptance or contestation of the stereotype, COOCs saw their gender/sexual identity bound by common lines of racial and ethnic identity and history as Chinese.

Resisting the Stereotyping of Chinese Students Overseas

In addition to race and gender, discussions about the stereotyping of Chinese culture and individuals were also triggered by stories about Westerners' comments on perceived personal attributes of Chinese individuals. For instance, the perception of Chinese individuals as shy, socially inept, dependent, and obedient to authority was at the center of a report on how several European and Australian professors described the perceived weaknesses of Chinese students overseas (Zhou Guo Qiao Wang, Sep 9,

2008). The piece was copied and posted online in the daily headline section of Wenxuecity.com. According to this report, in the eyes of some European and Australian professors, Chinese students are diligent but remain socially isolated (lacking teamwork spirit) and show blind obedience to authority (academically dependent). A professor from the Swedish Royal Institute of Technology is quoted as saying that he was “impressed by the diligence of Chinese students” but regretted that “Chinese students would prefer to study alone and incapable to effectively participate in teamwork.” From this view, Chinese students overseas do not socialize with peers or participate in group activities effectively, and academically they develop a dependency on existing theories and modes of the established scholarship.

Although that image is not completely denied by COOCs, it is largely resisted by commentators who stated the view that it was unfair to expect Chinese overseas students to be sociable in a foreign context and impossible for them to challenge the academic authorities who can determine their fate. Regarding social isolation, no commentator denied it. However, some referred to the social and cultural barriers faced by students to justify this inclination: language differences, lack of adequate knowledge about the new culture—in matters such as social etiquette—and limited experience abroad prevented the Chinese students from effectively and enthusiastically socializing with different peoples in a new context. Others justified it by emphasizing an individualistic notion of self-reliance as fundamental for surviving in a foreign context. From this view, because of “language barriers,” Chinese

overseas students would need extra mental energy to interact with others and to figure out “the general rules of teamwork”; this extra effort would keep them from focusing on what they could contribute to the teamwork. .

In regards to obedience to authority, most commentators responded based on the view that this is not a weakness but a pragmatic imperative given that immediate supervisors or professorial advisers can alter the students’ career fates. For commentators, survival in an academic system where unequal power relations prevail was given a much higher priority, a goal that is more pressing than developing independent scholarship in Western academic environments that cannot be easily challenged, not even by Westeners. As one commentator stated:

Overseas, surviving is the first priority for us Chinese. Indeed, compliance with power is probably related to life pressures felt by the Chinese (commentary to Zhou Guo Qiao Wang, Sep 9, 2008).

Another commentator put it in this way:

How the hell to challenge? Where-ever and whenever you are a student, your advisor is the God. Challenge your advisor if you don’t want to live (commentary to Zhou Guo Qiao Wang, Sep 9, 2008).

Drawing on personal experience, one writer argued that U.S. professors are the first to stress the power of and respect to the authority and would never tolerate any challenge from students. One commentator self-identified as *Dogslayer* even described the dark side of U.S. academia as a kind of “mafia or gangland” tyrannized by “the academic hegemons and their henchmen.” Along these lines, a commentator nicknamed *Dr.*

Buffalo added:

Foreigners who say such things (encouraging Chinese students to challenge authority) are either genuinely naïve or purely hypocritical. I was once almost

kicked out by my boss for challenging him (commentary to Zhou Guo Qiao Wang, Sep 9, 2008).

Like this one, other personal accounts of retaliation against challengers serve as admonition for those who dared to challenge. The last comment on this posting is from a commentator self-identified as *Wiserman*, who moved beyond reacting to the report to suggesting face-saving strategies to succeed in case of confrontational communication: “You have to give enough face to your professor when you are trying to question him. You can’t be too abrupt and direct to say that he has made a mistake” (commentary to Zhou Guo Qiao Wang, Sep 9, 2008).

Keeping a functional interpersonal relationship with those in power thus seems to be highly valued by the online commentators, who perceived it as a rational choice for survival in a foreign context, as a way to deal with the hierarchical oppression that exists even in a democratic society. One commentator labeled this choice “social pragmatism.”

In sum, these commentators identified as a cohesive group that contested the negative characterization of the Chinese to shift the focus from personal attributes to the social and structural realities faced by Chinese in foreign contexts. For them, the negative attributes and behaviors ascribed by outgroup, Western observers were not essential or innate qualities of the Chinese—as suggested by observers. On the contrary, these perceived attributes were, in fact, strategic, rational, and pragmatic choices imposed by the disadvantaged political positions occupied by Chinese students in Western institutions, and by the lack on intercultural competence when

managing life in a new cultural context.

Nationality: Defining National Identity across Borders

Conceptions of national cultures and national character are a common point of reference in discussions among COOCs. These references often entail the communication of a sense of national identity in a context of comparison and debate. Under this category, China is discussed as an imagined cultural system with a distinct history, set of beliefs, social structures, and ideologies that set it apart from any individual Western country—often the U.S. is the main point of comparison—or from “Western culture” as a general cultural categorization. Here, commentators compare national cultures using broad generalizations about the beliefs and values that are deemed to be defining the national character. The comparisons—in most cases by stressing opposition—often lead to debate a range of opinions that reveal diverse positions of identification among participants as they make sense of their place and status in the global multicultural environment. For the purposes of discussion, I will present evidence from online discourse under the particular topics of discussion addressed by commentators: the Chinese moral character and xenocentrism, citizenship and repatriation, and historical evolution of the Chinese nation.

Defending the moral character of the Chinese against xenocentrism.

Chinese outside China, exposed to marked individual and cultural differences, start judging their own cultural group differently and may become critical, even cynical, about what used to be familiar to them. These self-revelations entail discussion of the

perceived attributes that define the Chinese individual or collective “moral character,” often defined in comparison with members of other nationalities. Such discussions often lead to contentious debates on the moral qualities of the Chinese and, in many instances, to a debate on the existence of xenocentrism among Chinese individuals who criticize Chinese culture. The term xenocentrism is applied pejoratively by Chinese nationalists to criticize Chinese admirers of Western civilization, who are often labeled as xenocentrists or *ChongYang MeiWai* (worshipping the overseas and adoring the foreign).

In most cases observed, debates on the Chinese character were triggered by comments by other COOCs who reflected on the collective, moral character of the Chinese people. For instance, when one commentator self-identified as *Kaola* summarized his impressions after visiting Australia, he finished the piece with a reflection on the moral character of the Chinese people (Hai Wai Bai Gan, Nov 19, 2005). In this case, exposure to a different social milieu and ethos in another country—where evidence of crime and social insecurity was not visible—made the writer reflect on the “low qualities” of the Chinese culture and people. *Kaola* argued that in contrast to Australia, in China people lack good faith, integrity, honesty, credibility, trust, and even law-abidingness. The resulting social insecurity in China was leading to a general climate described as “a culture of wall, partition, and anti-burglary facilities.” *Kaola* concluded that The Great Wall, once the proud symbol of Chinese culture, now symbolizes immense fear or insecurity among people.

This ingroup criticism stirred waves of mostly negative reactions against *Kaola*, with only a few agreeable ripples. Those in disagreement with *Kaola* pointed out that self-criticism might be reasonable and constructive, but “to disparage one’s culture in an incomprehensibly destructive manner is detrimental.” One commentator stressed that constructive self-criticism must emphasize opportunity to change and create goodwill for establishing intracultural bonds and touching the conscience of people. For this commentator, *Kaola*’s moral judgment, without consideration for cultural self respect, was seen as “repulsive” and evoked intense disapproval. Some of these commentators were suspicious of the motives of those who magnify the flaws of the Chinese while having blind faith for Western culture. Their reactions led to a different reflection on their own culture: xenocentrism as a cultural aspect of Chinese culture. As one commentator stated, the real motive behind the belittlement of Chinese culture is the author’s interest in distinguishing him or herself from the Chinese mass in order to get aligned with Western powers, whose dominant status is insurmountable. For some, the most “indecent” Chinese are those who play the role of destructive critics of their own culture while professing blind faith in foreign things. So xenocentrism, from the perspective of one these commentators, was the most notorious quality of the “uncivilized Chinese.”

The messages that resounded with *Kaola*’s observation fueled the debate on Chinese xenocentrism. For example, a commentator claimed that the Chinese, even those outside China, were not on such high moral grounds for they are obsessed with

petty tricks and small gains: “Cheap Chinese clientele love to explore the generous Western customer services” with customer-friendly refund policies. This claim provoked the reply of those who downplayed cultural differences to point out that people from other cultures also practice similar tricks. Some quotations from online text illustrate this position: “Too many white ragpickers in Canada . . .,” “In Paris, many white ticket evaders in public transportation . . .,” “Honest Americans follow the rules, but they also love free stuff,” “In corporate America, infighting is also a common thing. Gossip is abundant even among Whites,” “Such self-criticism is unilateral in ascribing some commonness of all human beings to the disposition of a specific culture.” One commentator replied to the comment by stressing that the reality of the Chinese overseas did not fit such moral accusation and affirmed the moral qualities of this group:

...the Chinese are most law-abiding, fair, and easy-going citizens in other nations; petty tricks are played by the poor, who simply want to save some money that they so much need in largely lawful ways, not just Chinese individuals (commentary to Hai Wai Bai Gan, 2005).

For some ingroup critics, the debate on the Chinese character and society was framed within a comparison with the Western world as a better society—an impression held by many if not most Chinese online commentators who disclosed that they were living in Western nations. For example, a commentator wrote: “All those who say the West is no better than China should get out and go back China.” Another commentator offered this unfounded, seemingly objective statistical generalization: “the indecent Chinese per 10 thousand are more than the indecent Westerners per 10

thousand.” In a similar, pseudo-sociological reflection on the matter, a commentator expressed the belief that the overall moral qualities of the population in the U.S. were better than in China. In other entries, different commentators stated: “Refusing to accept one’s own problems is a manifestation of self-inferiority” and “Chinese should prioritize self-examination to defending themselves or even whitewashing or excusing their flaws.” In some of these commentaries, the identification of the West as superior and Chinese as inferior often entailed a reflection on what needs to be done for cultural improvement; as one writer put it:

Chinese culture should improve in terms of behavior, manner, sanitation, consideration for others . . . since improvement of national quality is determined by the quality of individual character; the ideal situation for the agglomeration of Chinese overseas is to be magnanimous and of heartsease commentary to *Hai Wai Bai Gan*, 2005).

According to some of those who identified Western societies as superior, the West not only had better infrastructure and material resources but also humanitarian standard.

These commentators were frequent targets of the “angry youth”—the “furious Chinese online nationalists” as Osnos (2008) and Wu (2007) label them—who are likely to focus on the issue of xenocentrism to interpret cultural difference. In their discourse, negative evaluation of the moral fiber of the Chinese culture is more related to political, colonial, ideological position of the commentators than to the moral or biological essence of the Chinese people. For some of them, internal attacks were racist and simply incomprehensible, which led to express suspicion of the true cultural identity of these critics. As some presumed, most of the critics who badmouth China and Chinese culture cannot be Chinese but possible Japanese, Koreans or other

foreign nationals who practice their Chinese language skills while taunting the Chinese ideologically. In their perception, ingroup criticism becomes outgroup criticism, which perhaps made more sense for them and was easier to deal with.

The debate over citizenship and repatriation to China. Emigrating to and relocating in a new national culture inevitably leads to experiencing cross-cultural interactions in the institutionalized contexts of immigration and naturalization processes, such as taking language proficiency tests and applying for college admission, visas, immigration status or citizenship in a new country. These are experiences that users of Wenxuecity.com often discuss in their virtual community. Some of these discussions, particularly on applying for citizenship in a new country or choosing repatriation, are particularly poignant for they involve reflection on the meaning of a Chinese nationality or giving up Chinese citizenship. These debates on citizenship and repatriation reveal the users' diverse points of identification in regards to cultural affiliation to China. At the core of the debate are the different positions taken by commentators regarding the inseparability of an affective identification from Chinese nationality and legal status as citizens.

For instance, a headline story posted online was about a Chinese celebrity actor who has British citizenship but is still active in the Mainland and Hong Kong markets (Dong Fang Zao Bao, 2008). According to the story, the actor once told a reporter that his naturalization in Britain made "China better known to the world" and made himself "become a better Chinese." This type of self-promoting discourse

sickened some members of the virtual community, evoking negative reactions from the Chinese online debaters. As argued by one commentator, the actor's position was all "for the sake of personal convenience." Another commentator asked: "How come he could be representing China to the world if he is still working in China and making Chinese wages?" Reactions like these suggest that the actor's effort to separate legal immigration status from affective attachment to Chinese nationality so as to make them both work for personal advantage was received as hypocritical by some online commentators.

However, for those who disclosed that they had already formalized their status as citizens of another country, the separation of legal status and affective cultural attachment was a pragmatic choice, a conciliation that was not only possible but often prescribed to others. Maintaining a core Chinese cultural identity and a sentimental bond with China, even after taking oath of allegiance to another country, was promoted by some Chinese overseas online commentators. Even among those who wrote about the seriousness of an oath of allegiance in the citizenship ceremony, keeping a sentimental closeness to the old country seemed basic for maintaining their peace of mind. One commentator analogized being granted citizenship to becoming a grown up: "As a grown up with your own family, you can and ought to have close relationship with your parents." From this view, the new citizenship symbolized that one's independence and cultural attachment to motherland can be and should be maintained sentimentally even after giving up legal affiliation to her. For others,

Chinese identity can be coated by new citizenship but nobody can completely

“squeeze the old country out of their blood (Jin, 2007).” As one commentator

expressed it:

Anywhere and anytime, poor or rich, high or low, you’re always wearing that yellow skin, allergic to dairy foods, and desperately nostalgic of hometown cuisine in the old country. Chinese like all Asians are forever foreigners in the eyes of those white and black hosts (commentary to Bei Fang Han Ge, 2008).

Debates over citizenship in a foreign country were complemented by debates on repatriation to China, as commentators tried to negotiate immigration status and affective attachment to Chinese national identity. In this respect, online commentators compared the challenges and opportunities for personal advancement that they are likely to face in China and in their host country. Framed around the topic of repatriation, commentators reflected on the dilemma of staying in a foreign land or returning to the motherland by comparing individual choices, social structures, and institutional climates in China and host societies. The online discourse on repatriation reveals the complex, multidimensional realities lived by Chinese individuals. Some are forced to go back due to personal situations. Some choose to stay abroad to seek improved living conditions or better career opportunities. Others have to stay but always be pining to move back. Some feel lucky for getting away from the old country—for them, repatriation is out of the question. Some would like to consider the option of returning to China after achieving certain goal abroad. Many flinch while pondering the potential difficulties for a returnee in China.

Among the COOCs, a frequent point of discussion was raised by those who

were pursuing academic careers abroad and questioning whether to go back or stay abroad. In the early years of the “Studying Abroad Wave” in China, from the late 1970s to late 1980s (Chang, 2004), perhaps few could foresee that they were permanently leaving their country. But today, with direct contact with other social systems and the realization of the socioeconomic distance between China and the host cultures, more and more Chinese are determined to settle down in more developed countries in order to improve their professional and personal status. At the same time, with recent economic trends bringing prosperity to China and significant financial crises to the West, some Chinese overseas begin to reconsider the prospect of starting over in their country of origin and many have already done that. In this online forum, stories of overseas students returning to China—many of which express deep remorse for going back—provoke heated discussion that allow for the enactment of positions of national identification.

One of such stories was posted as a blog posting titled “A top ocean turtle treated as a common land tortoise: How remorseful to have come back to China for career” (Hui Guo Fa Zhan, 2008). The phrase “ocean turtle” is a Chinese phonological metaphor for a returnee from overseas. The author of this piece has a doctoral degree in liberal arts from a top U.S. research university and returned to China to pursue an academic career. The writer described her or his frustrating experiences in China and manifested regret for choosing repatriation. The blogger self-identified as a “brilliant” liberal arts Ph.D. who had the credentials to secure a faculty position in the U.S. but

somehow chose to return to China for career development. However, frustrated by the social milieu of China—described as a climate with arrogant, authoritarian personnel and where social networking is much more important than personal credentials—the blogger stated: “I sincerely realized that in China it is far more important who you personally know than who you really are.” Having been rejected, discouraged, and let down in China’s academia, the blogger finally gave up and joined the business sector. To the online community, the blogger offered an admonitory conclusion: “Those who want to devote to scholarship would be better off staying in the U.S.” Through cultural comparison based on perceived oppositions between China—seen as a system of authoritative patronage—and the United States—by implication a meritocracy—the blogger chose to advise pragmatic adaptation to the U.S. as the best choice based on his or her personal experiences.

In a different online article addressing a more nuanced comparison of China and the United States, a Chinese doctoral candidate who was approaching graduation wrote about the factors that discouraged repatriation (Bao Bao Jiu Le Bu, 2007). Among these factors he cited problems related to securing housing, education, jobs, social welfare, and security in China. Titled “Motherland, it’s not easy to say I love you,” the article conveyed a double-edged complaint. On the one hand, it presented a complaint against the Chinese social reality that disabled the patriotic sentiment among Chinese overseas. On the other hand, instead of exalting living conditions or meritocracy in the U.S., the writer denounced the “exploitation and enslavement”

inflicted by the “bosses” on their “employees” in American academia. The blogger stressed the merciless exploitation by Chinese “bosses” (Chinese faculty in American research institutions) of their Chinese post-doctoral colleagues who earned their degrees in China and found themselves living miserably in U.S. academic institutions, like the migrant workers in their old country. This message triggered a heated debate. Some criticized the blogger for prioritizing personal interests over loyalty to the motherland as follows:

You’re too mindful of your personal gains and losses to be capable of understanding the love for one’s native land . . . as such a selfish person, you’d better stay abroad and harm foreigners . . . always prioritizing personal interests . . . such love is so cheap, your motherland does not need it (commentary to Bao Bao Jiu Le Bu, 2007).

Along these lines, others believed Chinese students studying abroad are talented intellectuals that form a huge reservoir of intelligentsia with great potential benefits for the development and prosperity of their motherland. One commentator even accused the blogger of being a shame for Chinese students in the U.S., who should be “hard-working, enduring, resilient, and ambitious.” This commentator used the phrase “the Chinese overseas students in the U.S.,” as an identity label that one should be proud of. From this view, Chinese doctoral students in the U.S. should become the world’s best in their areas so as to be more assertive and determinant in their strategic life or career choices. This position, while focusing on personal achievement, still retained a link to Chinese nationality as a key anchor.

In contrast, other critical reactions shifted the focus from selfishness or loyalty to Chinese nationality to a pragmatic, individualist view on personal winning and

losing. The majority of commentators that shared this view stated their believe that the “top guys survive abroad (while) most guys (not all of them) who go back-to-China are losers,”—this with the exception of those who returnees who have deep social networks and eminent family backgrounds in China. Among these commentators, one characterized the blogger cited above as “such a big loser” for failing to develop a positive relationship with an American boss and predicted that the blogger could be a failure in both the U.S. and Chinese academia. Shifting the focus from social factors to personality traits, one commentator stated: “Personality determines fate. One with such shilly-shally character would be a loser anywhere;” in a similar note another declared: “You must learn to be a person before you learn to do things.”

Other reactions to the blogger were more hateful and cynical; these often are interlaced with an ideological tone against the Chinese system and in defense of the U.S. or in defense of China based on the notion of loyalty to motherland. For example, when responding to a commentator who wrote about returning to China, two COOCs wrote: “Go and kill yourself ...” and:

Don’t care about your personal gains and losses . . . Just go back China. Your motherland’s poisonous rice and milk are waiting for you, as well as the corrupted officials and temptresses’ STD . . . You shouldn’t wait but jump into the warm embrace of your motherland (commentary to Bao Bao Jiu Le Bu, 2007).

Yet others use sarcasm to express their criticism: “I’m a loser ... I can’t find a job in China; and my parents are also losers, they can’t help me find a job in China either.

As a loser, I chose to stay in the U.S.”

On the other hand, there were commentators who were sympathetic with the blogger's negative view of the U.S. climate. For them, the blogger just delivered some "honest remarks" containing some "truthful thoughts" and should not be blamed, accused, and condemned. One sympathizer pointed out the systematic flaws and institutional vices of the U.S. graduate research establishment as the fundamental reason why people like the blogger, who are doing "bench jobs" in laboratories, would like to quit:

Ph.D. students are cheap labor for professors. To extend your privilege as cheap labor, you can (have to) do post-doc. It is skewed because the first priority is never science. It's always about publishing papers so that you can get funds and get tenure . . . This system is killing science. So I quit (commentary to Bao Bao Jiu Le Bu, 2007).

Other sympathetic commentators counterpunch hit the critics with the same cynical and insulting language, calling rival commentators "wretched, pathetic, snobbish perverts who are addicted to badmouthing people anonymously online." One resounded with a comment made by the blogger about the meanness of Chinese professorial bosses in the U.S. by generalizing that all "Chinese in the U.S." are "stingy, cruel, greedy, and arrogant." One commentator called the blogger "a brave warrior who dares to tell the truth" and chided critics for their "small-mindedness, intolerance, and verbal brutality." According to his COOC, fellow Chinese should help each other by giving constructive advice instead of hurling invectives to one another. In contrast to critics who focused on individual character or attributes, commentators who sympathize with this blogger tended to focus on how structural factors at home and abroad hinder an individual's life options. They struggled against

being labeled “loser.” For them, going back or planning to return to China might seem unimpressive to many Chinese overseas but should not be regarded as a sign of “failure;” it is an option that does not need to be target of virtual smashes and smears. Further, their comments also departed from the construction of binary opposition between China and the U.S. that pits the faults of the Chinese system against the unquestioned virtues of the U.S. system.

The cultural comparisons and perspectives that come into play as commentators debated the dilemma of going back to China or staying abroad exemplify the multiple positions of identification taken by the Chinese overseas as they weigh personal, social, ideological, material, and spiritual challenges in the multi-dimensional reality of a multicultural and postcolonial global society. Often, their interpretations follow the expected ideological frames regarding criticism or defense of the Chinese political regime. But transcending political-ideological lines are deeper structures of meaning that relate to competing notions of stable, bounded Chinese identity versus a more fluid and accommodating sense of personal and group identity.

Comparing the historical evolution of China and the West. The comparison of national cultures often involves references to history as a major force shaping the evolution, present condition, and future of nations and peoples (Bei Fang Han Ge. 2008, Aug 23; Qing Nian Can Kao, 2007; Ren Zai Bei Mei, 2007, Mar 1). Among COOCs, the comparison of the historical trajectory of China and the U.S. is a

popular topic that prompts debate as the enactment of positions of identification. The flow of the discussion seems to enact a Chinese dialectic philosophy that is summarized in the saying “30 years to the west of the river and 30 years to the east of the river.” This saying suggests the vicissitudes of a society over history, in which rival states change their relative advantageous or disadvantageous positions in some rhythmic pattern. Some of the posted commentaries comparing the historical trajectories of China, Europe, and the U.S provide a space to illustrate the dynamics on online discussion under this topic.

In one commentary posted regarding, for instance, the writer used metaphorical language to stress historical and political differences between the “West” and China:

When the West is in daylight, China must be at night; when the West was in the dark age of medieval Europe, China was basked in the glaring sunlight of the Tang and Song (dynastic) prosperities; while the European-originated colonizers exulted in their victorious postures as conquistadors, China had to bear the humiliation losing resources and dignity to ethnic groups on her border (Qing Nian Can Kao, 2007).

This writer also pointed out how spiritual belief systems in China and the West also separated them: that of Christian Westerners, who believe that people are born with original sin, and the Confucian Chinese belief that all humans are born with pristine virtue. This polarizing discourse, revealing and magnifying cultural differences, was largely rejected by online commentators who found this framing of differences as cultural antithesis “shallow, flimsy, naïve and intellectually pretentious.” Some commentators stated that the so-called “observations” by the author were noted by

others for a hundred years and yet the author presented them as original insights. In the words of some commentators: “Such pretension is a shameful result of Chinese education;” “Next time think twice before publishing this shit;” “Such naïve, childish comparison is joking in such a high-information society.”

One commentator invalidated the comparison by minimizing differences: “I found . . . no much difference at all between China and the United States after so many years of living in the U.S. and becoming a U.S. citizen.” Another commentator, using the pseudonym *Old Cowboy*, argued that China-U.S. cultural differences are fundamentally confined to differences regarding awareness and interpretation of human rights. Among those who underplay differences, some even suspected that the real motive of the article’s author was to instigate conflict and undo Western influences on common Chinese people.

In other instances, the comparisons of Chinese and U.S. historical trajectories were framed as a debate opposing China’s “progress” to U.S. “regress” over the last two or three decades. In a forum dedicated to this topic, an article written by a blogger with the pseudonym *Northern Brother* (NB) approached this topic by contrasting the changing attitudes of U.S. and China custom officers over a span of about two decades. The blogger drew on direct, personal experience to observe that the attitudes of Chinese custom officers have changed from cold and nagging to genial and tidy, especially before the Beijing Olympics. Meanwhile, he added, U.S. custom officers have become more indifferent, business-like, and impatient compared to how they

were years ago, probably due to the tightened border security after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. Thereby, for NB, the Beijing Olympics and the 9/11 attacks become two significant historical events that signify an epochal rotation: China is progressing as the U.S. is declining.

This piece triggers a reverberation of reactions and divergent opinions. Some echo the main argument with supportive evidence. Some oppose it with a cynical tone. Some sound equivocal. One even wrote a poem to corroborate NB's observation. And while some use cultural opposition to support or refute the main argument, others seem to reject the construction of binary cultural oppositions and opt to trivialize or transcend cultural differences. Relatively more commentators adhere to NB's observation, since the forum is maintained by NB in his own Web blog.

For example, to support NB's position, a commentator with the pseudonym *Northeast Languid* stated that his personal experiences of going through customs in China and in the U.S. corroborate NB's observations. Another commentator self-identified as *redsun* indicated that he or she encountered the same "indifference" and "coldness" from custom officers in the San Francisco Airport, who have "no idea that their faces represent the image of the U.S."

Suspecting of NB's antagonistic approach, a commentator identified as *Foxy Fox* (FF) placed NB into a special category of Chinese overseas: those who "criticize the U.S. vehemently while at the same time enjoy all the benefits from the U.S with ease . . . Such disparity is hypocritical and irrational . . . duality out of extreme self-

inferiority.” Others in disagreement provided references to personal experiences that contradicted NB’s observations. In one of such replies, the opposition is inverted when the commentator cited the “nice and considerate” treatment received in the Orlando and Chicago airports and “straight, long faces” of custom officers at the Beijing Capital International airport.

Other reactions in disagreement with NB’s original blog entry avoided the binary opposition of historical trajectories to offer a more dynamic reading of historical trajectories, one in which differences are not in conflictive opposition. From this view, China’s progress might be “real and normal” but the comparison to the U.S. is “unnecessary”; furthermore, as one commentator pointed out, using such trivial comparison to arrive at the “far-fetched” conclusion about U.S.’s regress is simply “frivolous.” Even when commentators hold that the distance between China and the West might be abating, they perceive a gap still big enough to declare—using the competition frame “winning vs. losing”—that China and/or Chinese culture is and will be the loser in a long run.

Overall, the discussion of historical evolution seems to suggest that exaggerating cultural opposition between China and the West is unwelcome in the virtual community of Chinese overseas. In the view of most online commentators, cultural difference is not equivalent to cultural opposition. Chinese overseas might experience and accept differences but seem to reject or eschew the polarization of cultures to favor a pacifistic point of view. In this sense, the reactions to this

comparison of U.S. and China's historical progress also reveal the positions of identification among commentators. Those in agreement with the comparison made by the blogger might be wishful for the brightness of China's future and foreseeing the fundamental transformation of the whole world's political and economical situation. Those who disagree tend to be sensitive to the current material reality and stubborn about their assessment of a better society in the West than in China. For many, rejecting the notion that China's progress is linked to U.S. regress seems to be the pragmatic way to articulate a position of identification as Chinese overseas operating in a cultural borderland. This interpretation seems to be necessary if one is to hold the legitimacy of the ideology of the American dream (in the U.S. context) and of upward mobility in Western nations that drive many Chinese to relocate in the first place. In other words, they have their invested interests in the prosperity of their host countries. In this sense, if China and the U.S. were to be perceived a pair of antitheses, Chinese individuals in the U.S. would inevitably feel difficult to deal with their split cultural identification.

Chapter Summary and Conclusions

Online interaction among members of this global, ethnic cyber community often leads to the comparison of cultures as an interpretive strategy that allows commentators to make sense of the place of Chinese culture in multicultural contexts. One of the salient fields of discursive activity relates to social categorizations of difference such as race and ethnicity, gender, and nationality. Through this perspective

of identity, cultural identification is enacted as a response to perceived cultural differences encountered by COOCs while living in host cultures.

On Race and Ethnicity

Upon encountering cultural difference, COOCs struggle to discover and rediscover their cultural identity within new social hierarchies that become more immediate to them in their host societies. In discussions about race and ethnic difference, COOCs use comparison by opposition to place themselves in an imagined racial order and contrast the treatment afforded to foreigners in China and to the Chinese in foreign countries. In the multiracial U.S. society, they identified themselves as members of a relatively cohesive Chinese racial group that is disadvantaged, marginalized, inferior, and invisible in the existing racial hierarchy. Further, they see no meaningful connections to or sense of common purpose with other races and ethnic groups. In their imagined racial order, stereotypical and prejudiced constructions of other racial groups are common, which leads to the positioning of White and Black Westerners as preferred point of reference and of their culture as normative, with much less attention given to other peoples of color or ethnic minorities. When assessing the lower status and invisibility of Chinese individuals in Western societies, many COOCs drew a comparison with the privileged treatment received by Westerners in China, as a way to vent feelings of frustration and resentment toward both Chinese and Western hosts. Although in this area of discussion the commentators tend to refer to the Chinese and other races as groups

rather than individuals, making sociality the most prominent dimension of their identity, they may also stress personal achievement and individual traits in their explanation of differences or as ways to deal with the perceived inferiority of the Chinese in host cultures.

On Gender and Group Stereotypes

As in the forums addressing racial difference, online discussions of stereotypes of Chinese masculinity in Western societies and of Chinese students in Western universities serve as a site where commentators affirmed a sense of identification as members of the Chinese cultural group. A shared feeling of being victims of prejudice or cultural misunderstanding lead COOCs to express their views with little attention given to internal differences and divisions within the group. On the contrary, the views expressed enact a tension between “us” the Chinese and “them” the Westerners who disseminate the stereotype.

This is the case regardless of whether COOCs agreed or rejected the stereotypes. In terms of the stereotypical view of Chinese males as physically weak and sexually undesirable, individuality and sociality intersected in discourse to drive COOCs’ cultural identification.

And in debates on the character of Chinese students overseas, COOCs stress the sociality and materiality dimension of their identity by highlighting social and institutional contexts where unequal power relations and cultural and institutional barriers account for the negative traits ascribed by Westerners to Chinese individuals.

On Chinese National Identity

In contrast to discussions about race and gender, online discussions of topics related to Chinese national identity feature a much more fragmented spectrum of positions of identification and a more fluid sense of individual and group identity. Specifically, the debates expose the divide between critics of Chinese culture and society and those who defend the positive moral traits of the Chinese collective identity while accusing Chinese critics of xenocentrism and pointing out flaws and shortcomings in U.S. or Western peoples and systems. Those who defend China enact a clearly defined sense of group identity bound by loyalty and affective attachment to Chinese nationality and citizenship. Their discourse features the attribution of high moral standards to the Chinese people, the affirmation of pride in Chinese ancient history and culture, and confidence in the ascending position of China as a world power, and the attack of critics who are labeled xenocentric. This positioning places them in an antagonistic relation with COOCs who compare the Chinese and Western nations to stress the moral flaws of the Chinese and the economic and social underdevelopment of China, while affirming identification with the superiority of Western values and social systems. COOCs who are critical of Chinese culture and peoples tend to enact a more fluid sense of identity that allows them to seek accommodation or conciliation of differences as a rational strategy for cultural survival and economic success in their host societies. Driven by an individualist and pragmatist perspective, they may not see disloyalty in adopting a foreign citizenship

and renouncing Chinese citizenship or consider that taking a critical stance against China and for the West means the absence of any affective identification with Chinese culture. The spectrum of identity positions in regards to nationality illustrates the internal diversity of the virtual community and the intersection of individuality, sociality, materiality, and spirituality in processes of cultural identification.

Perceptual Cultural Identification and the Interplay of Self and Other

In the communication approach to identity studies, , cultural identity is defined as one's self concept formed and performed in communication that emphasizes one's connection to cultural membership. In the virtual community studied, performance of cultural identity involved the expression of awareness and judgment of cultural differences observed through intercultural interaction with both members of the ingroup of Chinese living overseas and with non-Chinese peoples. The online discourse analyzed in this chapter featured a particular dynamic of cultural identification that I have labeled perceptual cultural identification. In this form of identification, COOCs enact their sense of cultural membership through comparison between self and other in a process that is driven by the exchange of information on and heuristic interpretation of perceived differences rather than the by the need to take any strategic action or assume ideological positioning. In this form of identification, individuals strive to understand who they are by looking-out at the cultures they are having close interactions with and looking-in at their own culture. In perceptual cultural identification, subjects are engrossed with making sense of differences and

are motivated to exchange cultural knowledge so as to reduce the uncertainty inevitably felt in intercultural contexts or to react to negative representations of Chinese culture and peoples constructed by others with a positive affirmation of their identity.

Within the community examined, a salient frame for the interpretation of the meaning of the cultural differences discussed is the dilemma between cultural shame and cultural pride. According to Hecht et al (2005), cultural identification can generate subjective – emotive, affective, and spiritual—reactions during the process of gaining awareness of one’s cultural membership. Cultural shame and cultural pride represent two polarized subjective reactions in this virtual community. Particularly in the debates on national identity, online discussions reflect a dialectic tension between pride and shame. In the enactment of pride, the spiritual dimension of identity is expressed as an affective attachment to a sense of collective cultural membership in Chinese culture. On the other hand, individuality and materiality fuel cultural shame and provide justification for a pragmatic, individualist accommodation and adaptation to host societies. As observed in the examples provided above, the tension between those who affirm cultural shame and those who express cultural pride becomes a source of internal division among COOCs.

Furthermore, expressions of pride and shame reflect the particular ways in which Chinese individuals living overseas learn to conciliate conflicting dimensions of their fractured identity. For instance, while COOCs are mostly realistic about

differences in economic and social conditions in both China and their host country, most of them respect the cultural connection with their home country. Thus, many express the view that the socioeconomic factors that become determinants for their leaving and staying overseas do not contradict but rather complement their different levels of sentimental connection with Chinese culture. This separation of socioeconomic and cultural factors in their sense of cultural affiliation allows them to settle down on a meaningful borderland, whether they emphasize loyalty to China or a critical stance toward their own culture and people.

In the matrix of the four intersecting dimensions of identity that I have proposed as an interpretive framework (see Chapter 2) to understand the complexities of cultural identification, socioeconomic influences are closer to the dimension of materiality while cultural attachments are closer to spirituality. A clear awareness of the need to separate and conciliate these is crucial for the stability of the cultural identification of individuals in the researched community. In trying to do so, many perform a heightened sense of individuality—expressed through notions of pragmatism and survival—in the total constitution of their identity. Across topics, many stress personal achievement and individual traits in their discussion of how to deal with differences or as ways to deal with the perceived inferiority of the Chinese in host cultures. In effect, I note a general trend of stressing individuality (personal identity) and diminishing sociality (group identity), even though they are intersecting in every discussion, and even when the format in the online environment provide

room for community building.

This tendency to heighten individuality and diminished sociality can be explained with the interpretative framework elaborated in Chapter II. First, in the landing context of global and multicultural realities, the Chinese as a cultural group are neither in powerful social positions nor enjoy a favorable public image. As the discussion of their interpretations of racial hierarchies and gender stereotyping illustrates, they may react to negative perceptions of their culture by emphasizing group identity or sociality and identifying as victims of unequal social, cultural and political relations or power. Yet, the consideration of collective action or group empowerment to level the playing field is out of the realm of discussion. As a general tendency, commentators opt for focusing on individual strategies to affirm their self-esteem through demonstration of personal achievement and individual performance. This escalation of individuality is also related to the ways in which COOCs manage tensions between cultural shame and cultural pride, for individuality, personal achievement, and moral qualities become a source of pride and success in the new environment.

This tension between individuality and sociality, and materiality and spirituality, in identity negotiation speaks to the position of COOCs, many of whom are pursuing careers and taking a pragmatic approach to the acceptance of Western culture as a means to secure their livelihoods abroad. Although in the comments posted one reads affirmations of cultural cohesion and pride and of opposition to

Western practices, the majority of commentators also need to maintain a sense of connection to their new environments and viability as students and workers in the host cultures they inhabit. For some, their positioning is facilitated by the fact that they choose to relocate in the West because they were attracted to Western lifestyles and willing to experience and accept them in the first place. But even among COOCs who affirmed cultural pride and a strong sense of group identity, even the more appealing Western lifestyles should not alleviate one's loyalty to Chinese culture. As one commentator put it, "Enjoying life abroad doesn't mean you should betray your motherland."

CHAPTER V: MANAGING LIFE PREDICAMENTS: STRATEGIC CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION

Along with discussing perceived cultural differences through self-other comparison, another salient interpretive practice among Chinese overseas online commentators (COOCs) is using the online forum to give and receive practical advice on how to manage the predicaments of life abroad. In the particular context of Wenxuecity.com, I use the term predicaments of life to refer to situations of conflict, suffering or misunderstanding that result from exposure to new cultural environments and social contexts outside China. In effect, a salient topic that tends to attract heated discussion by the COOCs relates to contemporary and historical misfortunes faced by the Chinese in their interactions with members of other cultural groups. As some members of this Chinese virtual community share their tribulations online, a sense of common cultural membership motivates other online users to show empathy through comments that offer advice—in the form of guidance and admonishment—and prescribe concrete strategies to cope with life predicaments. In this chapter, I discuss how this practice of giving and receiving advice opens space for the enactment of a form of cultural identification that I term strategic cultural identification. This form of identification refers to the affirmation of group membership rooted in a sense of sharing some core cultural traits and facing similar conditions as marginalized, oppressed, and even victimized outsiders in a foreign culture. This particular sense of

identity is enacted through the discussion of strategies or steps of action deemed necessary for successful adaptation to life in an intercultural context.

More specifically, this chapter examines 1) the categories of life predicaments that draw most fervent discussion in the online forum, 2) the most common strategies given by COOCs as advice for coping with life predicaments, and 3) how cultural advice in online reactions to life predicaments reveals a form of identification that emphasizes a sense of Chinese cultural membership. The findings presented in this chapter identify four salient categories of life predicaments that evoked the most fervent responses among COOCs in various online forums. These predicaments stirred up heated discussions because many COOCs could recall their own experiences or imagine themselves in the same difficult situations. Therefore, empathy emerged spontaneously and motivated commentators to share their thoughts with the body of a virtual audience. Although the ways in which COOCs expressed empathy and offered advice varied significantly—and sometimes even mutated into sarcasm or cynicism—cultural identification regarding the life predicaments of other Chinese reflected a sense of group cohesion. Interestingly, the strategic advice given by COOCs was not only directed toward the individuals involved in specific cases at hand but as admonition to, presumably, all Chinese. Hence, the altruistic act of helping an individual in trouble better adapt in the foreign land involved also the affirmation of group identity and pursuit of positive self-conceptualization bound by a sense of cultural membership as Chinese. This affirmation suggests that beyond the

individual and ideological differences manifested on the surface of the discourse, COOCs seek to build a cohesive community upon which they can rely and to which they can relate on the basis of shared cultural traits.

Given its particular dynamics, I have termed this form of identification strategic cultural identification. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits that individuals tend to prefer and maintain the positive distinctiveness of the group they believe they belong to in response to an inherent demand for positive self-conceptualization. Although people from the same culture might show different degrees of attachment to their cultural membership, most of them normally have a preference for the positive evaluation of their culture. Along these lines, one may notice that in the online messages analyzed the majority of COOCs prefer a positive, distinctive, and realistic evaluation of Chinese culture. However, when COOCs read stories of other Chinese entrapped in real-life predicaments, the unpleasant realities faced by their compatriots seem to remind them of dimensions of vulnerability in the Chinese identity. This vulnerability becomes apparent when other COOCs express victimhood, disenchantment with life abroad or personal maladjustment in a host culture.

In order to make up for sunken cultural pride and uplift their sense of Chinese identity, COOCs provide counsel to the imagined virtual readership. I would argue here that this type of cultural counseling in COOCs' responses to the misfortunes of other Chinese expatriates reveals a particular kind of cultural identification: strategic

cultural identification. This is a form of communication that involves the enactment of identity through: a) articulation of a culturally specific perspective on a situation; b) identification of values to guide action; and c) prescription of a strategy or steps of action for managing existing and potential cultural challenges.

One way strategic cultural identification is enacted is when COOCs exchange their interpretations of collective, historical experiences of trauma and their enduring effects on contemporary Chinese culture. Another way in which we observe this dynamic is when COOCs discuss personal experiences or real-life stories in which a Chinese individual becomes disoriented in foreign cultural context and seeks help from other COOCs. Whether the focus is on collective processes or interpersonal settings and individual cases, interactivity among COOCs make strategic cultural identification a source of cultural knowledge and, arguably, intercultural competency for the larger community.

More importantly, the dynamics of strategic identification open a window into processes of identity formation through intercultural communication. COOCs' responses indeed reflect an interest in maintaining a positive personal attitude and image of the Chinese culture, which signifies a sense of ingroup solidarity or cohesion. Simultaneously, the repertoire of diverse—and often divergent—cultural strategies prescribed by COOCs reflects the heterogeneity of identity positions within the ingroup and thus serves to illuminate the tensions that characterize processes of identity formation. In the next sections, I present the findings through description and

discussion of four salient categories of life predicaments and the strategies suggested by COOCs for coping with them. In the last section of the chapter, I address who this online discourse reveal the complexities of identity performance among members of this group.

Salient Categories of Life Predicaments

According to some COOCs, the editors of Wenxuecity.com are adeptly selective and deliberate in presenting stories that would stir up the sentiments of their readers. Stories of the life predicaments of Chinese individuals in their interactions with people of other cultures tend to stir emotional reactions and empathy among COOCs. The four most salient categories of life predicaments, identified as the ones that attracted more frequent and scorching commentaries from the COOCs, were: 1) the effects of China's historical burdens on contemporary Chinese people and culture; 2) the academic quandaries of Chinese students overseas; 3) ethnic/racial crimes against Chinese victims; and 4) ethnic/racial crimes perpetrated by Chinese individuals against others. The effects of historical burdens refer to how the humiliation and suffering bore by China as a nation and by early Chinese immigrants affect attitudes and conditions of contemporary Chinese individuals overseas. Academic quandaries comprise individual cases of Chinese students entrapped in conflicts within foreign educational institutions due to a variety of personal, interpersonal, and social factors. Ethnic/racial crimes against Chinese victims refer to incidents in which Chinese overseas were brutally mistreated. The last category

comprises situations in which Chinese individuals became the perpetrators of crimes. Across topics and positions enacted by individual commentators, I focused on coding the forms of advice offered by COOCs and analyzing their meaning for processes of identification.

Historical Burdens: Reminiscing on Past Humiliations and Sufferings

Online discourse produced by COOCs seems to reaffirm the notion that History has been burdensome for the Chinese nation. The history of China overseas is closely related to the vicissitudes of the Chinese diaspora and of China as a global power (Lien, 2006; Pei, 2002; Tsu, 2006a & 2006b; Yin, 2007; Wickberg, 2007). Past humiliations are not easy to disregard for those who are seeking the meaning of their true identity in a foreign land. Furthermore, even China's past glory might become lackluster when compared to the more recent, splendid achievements of Western science and technology. Yet, the rationale of the current Chinese school curriculum is that students should take pride in China's glorious past and, at the same time, learn from those historical lessons to develop a unifying energy (Sun, 2005). Thus, the contemporary Chinese often show complex reactions when reminiscing about their motherland's history (Sun, 2005; Tsu, 2006).

COOCs' responses to stories about China's past and its effect on the present indicate that notions of cultural pride and shame are recurrent constructs in their interpretation of China's history and their process of cultural identification as Chinese. Regarding the Chinese past, there seems to be more accounts of cultural shame than

cultural pride among COOCs. Noticeably, the articles about the suffering and humiliation of the Chinese nation attracted more fervent discussion than those about the historical glories of Chinese civilization. COOCs' cultural identification was more often activated in responses to stories that triggered collective memories of the nation's traumatic experience caused by interaction with other nations, races, or ethnic groups. The articles that attracted more commentaries from COOCs are related to the following two themes: 1) the humiliations that China underwent during European colonial expansion in Asia, particularly the Opium Wars (the first from 1839-1840; the second from 1856 -1860) and the Invasion of Eight Allied Forces (1900-1901); and 2) the acts of ethnic cleansing, roundup, and demonization against early Chinese immigrants in the United States and other Western colonial territories in the 19th century.

Chinese humiliations from colonial times. In the writing and teaching of the modern history of China, Chinese educators seldom avoid the factual accounts of the “*Guo Chi*” or “national disgrace” forced onto old China by Western colonial and imperialist powers (Lien, 2006; Pei, 2002; Tsu, 2006a & 2006b; Yin, 2007; Wickberg, 2007). Through exposure to these historical narratives, one might expect that many COOCs would know this part of Chinese modern history and be sensitive to any new revelations related to such “national disgrace.” Certainly, their commentaries reflect familiarity with such narratives. The responses also show how COOCs manage the

negative dimensions of their cultural identity with messages of cultural advice that draw on historical lessons to offer strategies for action.

On this issue of historical humiliations experienced by the Chinese nation, three articles were posted online. The first is a blog entry by British reporter Malcolm Moore, titled “Did we mention the Opium War (Anti-CNN, Jan 11, 2010)?” Moore is identified as a *Daily Telegraph* Shanghai correspondent and wrote his piece in both Chinese and English. The starting point of the article is China’s execution of a British drug trafficker. The news about the execution led the author to reflect on and complain about how the Chinese would not get over the Opium War that occurred some 170 years ago. The second article is a report about how the statements of movie star Jackie Chan were widely approved by Chinese netizens after he publicly denounced France for auctioning two bronze historic sculptures looted by French and British invaders from the Chinese imperial palace during the Second Opium War (Hua Qiu Zai Xian, Feb 27, 2009). The third item is an article re-posted from the cultural forums of bbs.people.com.cn. In this article, a writer disapproved the looting of 12 bronze Zodiac animal heads considered national treasures from the Old Summer Palace or *Yuanming Yuan* (the Garden of Perfect Brightness) (Ren Ming Wang – Wen Hua Lun Tan, Feb 23, 2009). All the three articles evoked memories of China’s humiliations at the hands of colonial powers and provoked many commentaries among COOCs.

Among the responses to these articles, two distinctive positions of identification reflect how COOCs were struggling to deal with memories of national disgrace. One, apparently the predominant in the forums, stresses the unforgettable nature of China's national disgrace and criticizes Western hegemonic hypocrisy—seen, for instance, in the fact that Westerners promote justice and agape but refuse to return looted treasures from other nations. The other position, expressed less frequently but with intense rhetorical and argumentative efforts, emphasizes the value of cultivating internal peace by undoing the Chinese “collective psychosis” that has resulted from past traumatizing experiences. In articulating both positions, COOCs allude to values and prescribe strategies to deal with the enduring cultural and psychological burden of past national disgraces. The following analysis focuses on commentaries that can best illustrate the values and strategies offered.

In responding to stories of China's national disgrace, some COOCs reiterated the value of remembrance, manifested in the view that all past humiliations of China at the hands of other world powers should never fade in people's memory. For these COOCs, remembrance of China's humiliations, seen as an unjust consequence of unbalanced international conflicts forced by Western colonial powers in late modern history (the 19th century mostly), suggests one form of identification with Chinese culture. One commentator even quoted William Gladstone, a prominent British statesman at time of the Second Opium War, who described the War as “a war more unjust in its origin, a war more calculated to cover this country with permanent

disgrace (William Ewart Gladstone, May 11, 2011).” In reasoning the value of remembering China’s humiliations, another commentator cited Jewish people as a referent to suggest that the Chinese should “learn from Jewish people who make a movie about the holocaust every year. We should shoot a movie about those looters every year and compete in film festivals.”

In tandem with the value of remembrance, four strategies to manage historical burdens are advanced: revenge, indifference, forgiveness, and rotation. The first strategy discussed as a way to deal with the burden of national disgrace was revenge. Occasional voices in the forums called for revenge to get even and clean up the disgrace, as in expressions like: “It’s never too late for honorable people to retaliate”—a saying that has a similar meaning to the English proverb “Revenge is a dish best served cold.” On the other hand, expressions such as “We don’t care what the Brits think,” exemplify the strategy of indifference. Here, COOCs attempt to promote an attitude of detachment and thus neglect the negative effects and authority of those who speak from Western hegemonic standpoints. Forgiveness involves letting go of the past for the sake of one’s inner peace; and rotation entails a cognitive distinction of identity properties and strategic shift of emphasis, in this case from social to individual meanings. For instance, one commentator who advised forgiveness and rotation from sociality to individuality put the issue in this manner:

As individuals, we should be magnanimous and learn to forget and to forgive. Actually Chinese are taught the value of tolerance and avoidance since childhood. But the bloody lessons of history for a nation should never be

forgotten. Because those are national disgrace, the permanent scars of the entire nation . . . (commentary to Anti-CNN, Jan 11, 2010).

For this commentator, tolerance and forgiveness and individual choices encouraged even though the nation as a whole should never forget. All three strategies are set on the condition of keeping the memory of national disgrace alive. In this regard, COOCs who promote the remembrance of national disgrace seem to turn negativity into something positive that helps consolidate group unification, collective pride or individual self-confidence through a sense of righteousness or higher moral ground that can serve individuals in their intercultural experiences with Westerners.

On the other hand, some COOCs reminded readers that keeping the memory of disgrace alive and being hotheaded at the nation's inglorious past is a form of self-victimization and self-abuse that undermines one's internal tranquility. Stressing the opposite value, forgetfulness, they prescribed the same strategy: forgiveness, to "let go" and "get over it." As one COOC wrote:

Honestly, all these (instances of national disgrace) are China's embarrassments . . . the Chinese should get rid of the victimization complex and stop such self-abusing. Don't overreact to disrespecting provocations and let go of the historical burdens. Overreaction and indulgence [in the past] can only incur more atrocious, contemptuous taunts from those who abhor China with ill wishes. The outcome would be a more isolated China that seems to be turning against the whole world (commentary to Ren Ming Wang – Wen Hua Lun Tan, Feb 23, 2009).

The same commentator cried out: "Let go of it, idiots!!!!!!!!!!!" and "...be real, and be practical." He repeated: "You can't have endless inquisition into the historical matters, otherwise India might want China to return Tibet and Sichuan." He then incorporated

his critique of the Chinese Communist Party's patriotic indoctrination for contributing to this phenomenon:

Probably due to its internal diffidence, by adopting a frustrating mode of patriotic education, the CCP always likes to expose China's historical scars and relentlessly talk about how Chinese were bullied and oppressed . . . until ordinary Chinese become so fragile, jittery, and testy, lacking toughness for tolerance and internal peace. A true Chinese patriot should transcend the governmental indoctrination and maintain the deep attachment to the motherland by profoundly understanding this nation's immense tradition (commentary to Ren Ming Wang – Wen Hua Lun Tan, Feb 23, 2009).

The commentaries contributed by the writer typify the view that managing a negative property of one's cultural identity through forgiveness and tolerance entails a strategy of getting over the past and letting go of the memory. The COOCs who resonated with this position identified China's national disgrace as a form of cultural shame, which should and can be put in oblivion after so many years. In their view, forgetfulness and forgiveness can benefit individual Chinese in their immediate connection to the outside world. For them, the Chinese who would unload unbearable historical burdens can live better, especially when they have to interact with the outside world and need to happily live in Western and other nations that may have been part of the history of Chinese national humiliation.

***Pai Hua* or driving out the Chinese: Miseries of early Chinese migrants.**

Unlike other well-publicized historical instances of national defeat or subjugation, the history of the miseries suffered by Chinese people who emigrated to colonial and other foreign territories—often victims of deceit and pillage by their hosts and neighbors—are seldom mentioned in China's school curricula (Chang, 2003). On the

contrary, there have been public debates on whether Chinese emigrants should still be regarded as Chinese nationals (Lee, 2003; Tsu, 2006). Within the standard curriculum in China's general education programs, discussion of the atrocious treatment of Chinese migrants abroad is very limited and understated (Lee, 2003; Tsu, 2006). Therefore, one might expect to find that upon leaving China, individuals have a vague knowledge of the experiences of Chinese migrants upon leaving China. However, upon encountering stories of early Chinese migrants to the West, COOCs seem to easily identify with their predicaments in foreign nations due to common cultural membership and similar sojourning situations—such as cultural isolation in a host culture.

As one might expect, during the time period observed the website featured a low number of headlined stories on this topic. Nonetheless, when posted, the reactions to the stories were salient in terms of the intensity of discussion. I selected four articles that featured this topic. The first contains 14 cartoons published over 100 years ago satirizing early Chinese immigrants in the United States (Wang Yi Li Shi, Aug 13, 2009). These images reflect how U.S. American media demonized and belittled Chinese immigrants as dirty rat-eaters over. The second article is an in-depth feature with photos titled “Unbelievable humiliations in the past: The nightmares of early Chinese immigrants on Angel Island (Beijing Qing Nian Bao, March 15, 2009).” The third article is another in-depth article about how an early Chinese immigrant hero, Mr. Yixi Chen, whose actions left in awe a mob of hundreds of U.S. Americans

that were trying to brutally beat up a Chinese man (Zhong Hua Bo Ke, March 8, 2009). The fourth article is a review of U.S. professor Jean Pfaelzer's history book on how early Chinese immigrants were driven out from their shelters in several Western states of the United States in the 19th century (Guo Ji Zai Xiang, Aug 11, 2007). These articles presented a grim picture of the life of early Chinese migrants attacked or bullied by their hosts and neighbors in foreign lands. The commentaries in response reflect how COOCs enacted a sense of identity by relating to previous generations of Chinese immigrants and how they derive lessons and strategies for cultural survival from the treatment of their predecessors.

For instance, when debating how to interpret the cartoons with stereotypical and nasty images of early Chinese immigrants, one commentator refers to the need to abandon a "victim's mindset" and stressed the principle of self-respect to suggest the strategy of reinterpretation of meanings to subvert the negativity in the cartoons. This entails the re-interpretation of negative messages produced by a hegemonic culture about the Chinese sub-culture in ways that turn their negative meaning into more favorable or even empowering meanings for the Chinese. For example, when one commentator asked: "Why do we have to interpret these images as something really bad (like racist stereotyping) (commentary to Wang Yi Li Shi, Aug 13, 2009)?"

another responded in agreement:

I think the images in these cartoons only intended to be satirizing. None of these should be taken seriously. They are not necessarily racist at all. Our Chinese always like to use a victim's mindset to interpret others' artworks that depict them, and so they easily become so tense, which is a reflection of our

inferiority complex. Being too sensitive to discrimination is not a good thing. Actually the others might not have discriminating intentions at all. Even if they do, we can still take it with our own understandings. Like Asian Indians who translate 'cheap' into 'smart' and so they never feel inferior and always have good relationships with the Westerners. No complaint, no pain. How could you get respect from others if you don't respect yourselves (commentary to Wang Yi Li Shi, Aug 13, 2009)?"

The perspective in this comment implies a two-step cultural strategy for ingroup members. First, the Chinese should abandon the sense of victimization as the primary lens through which they read a cultural message and be aware of multiple meanings and even any original intention (sarcasm) and special context that produced criticism by an outgroup. Second, these COOCs suggest the strategy of reinterpretation to digest negative stereotypes and avoid feelings of victimization.

In another discussion, the strategy of rotation (sociality and individuality) leads to competing positions on how to deal with negative stereotyping. Some COOCs stress that group membership (sociality) should have no connection to one's personal success (individuality). As one commentator put it,

I don't understand why Chinese overseas always bank on the prosperity of their motherland. Black people don't even have a motherland and one of them now becomes American president (commentary to Beijing Qing Nian Bao, March 15, 2009).

Another group makes the opposite interconnection between individuality and sociality, emphasizing collective identity, as in this comment:

Chinese overseas having been oppressed for over a hundred years in foreign lands of course would naturally hope a more prosperous and powerful China. The position of a culture, such as an ethnic/racial group like Black people, is determined by the whole group rather than any individuals. The American president is only a half black, a typical Black-Skin White-heart. Besides he is just an exceptional individual case and cannot represent the whole group (commentary to Beijing Qing Nian Bao, March 15, 2009).

The first leads to the suggestion that the Chinese should be more self-reliant and minimize their emotional attachment to the motherland, so as to easily deal with the negative stereotyping from other cultures. The second implies that the Chinese should keep positive identification with their motherland, whose global status can help improve any individual Chinese. These interpretations are enactments of how COOCs' struggle to deal with negative aspects of their cultural identity. The strategy of rotating from sociality to individuality can make individual Chinese lessen their identification with perceived negative meanings of the Chinese culture, while correlating individuality and sociality can make individual Chinese strengthen their identification with and attachment to a group identity.

In sum, responses to stories of China's historical disgrace and miseries of early Chinese immigrants in the West exhibit some distinctive sets of cultural strategies. Those who favored remembrance of past disgraces, revenge, indifference, forgiveness, reinterpretation, and rotation from social to individual meanings were proposed as strategies to cope. Those who favored forgetting past disgraces advised forgiveness. With these cultural strategies, and driven by an internal demand for positive cultural identification, COOCs manifested their sense of cultural membership while prescribing ways to manage negative aspects of Chinese identity activated by historical references.

Entrapped on Campus: Cases of Academic Quandaries

Cultural identification was activated also by stories that referred to realities that were temporally and socially closer to COOCs' lives. Similar age, social background, education, and intercultural experiences can all become factors that facilitate an individual's emotional and cognitive identification with other ingroup members. As the findings indeed reveal, compared to historical burdens, life predicaments of Chinese students in foreign educational institutions did arouse close cultural identification, as reflected in the heated discussions among COOCs. On this topic, the responses contain more detailed cultural counseling through the exchange of life lessons, cultural insights, and advice. For the purpose of discussion and illustration, I selected two stories of academic quandaries and the comments evoked by them. The quality of the discussion generated by these two stories of extreme cases was the primary criterion for selection: both cases evoked a large number of responses and stirred up fervent discussion among COOCs.

The first story relates to the case of Xuemei Han, a Chinese female Ph.D. student at Yale University (Ren Zai Bei Mei, Oct 23, 2005). According to reports, she fought for a scholarship that had been cancelled when she transferred from one department to another. Although the result of the fight turned out to be uneventful (Han was offered a new scholarship in her new department), accounts of the strenuous process to regain the scholarship disturbed the virtual Chinese community. The second story involved another Chinese female Ph.D. student at Duke University, Zihui Tang, who accused her adviser of psychological abuse and academic oppression

(Duo Wei Shi Bao, Aug 22, 2006). Tang was later forced to leave the Ph.D. program with a terminal master's degree. In the first case, Han had more tension with the institution than with specific individual faculty members—at least from the information publicized. Han's promised scholarship or assistantship was halted after she transferred from the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology but reinstated at the same level by the Department of Forestry and Environmental Studies. In the second case, Tang, a student majoring in Chinese history, had tensions with her main advisor, Professor Sucheta Mazumdar—a prominent scholar of Chinese history with an Asian Indian background. Tang publicized her battle in weblogs and accused Mazumdar of abuse in detailed accounts. Eventually, Tang settled the dispute by accepting a terminal master's degree and left Duke. These different scenarios (institutional vs. personal) influenced the ways the COOCs responded to the stories. On the one hand, responses to Han's case were predominantly critical of the Chinese student and questioned her maturity and competence. On the other hand, responses to Tang's interpersonal conflict were mostly sympathetic. I will focus my analysis on the strategies advocated in COOCs' responses to the two cases.

Guided by the values of adaptation for survival, modesty, endurance, self-improvement, dignity and individualism, four strategies were identified from these responses: 1) get to know the system – study the norms of host society; 2) learn to accommodate – be ready to comply with rules of local institutions; 3) keep a low profile – avoid overt self-assertion; 4) lessen attachment to the cultural core –

decrease attachment to Chinese culture. The first two strategies promote cultural awareness, oriented outwardly in reference to norms, institutional rules, and power structures of the host culture. The last two strategies work on suggesting how to present oneself in the host society involving an inward orientation toward self-resilience as a way to improve an individual's ability to cope with challenges. The four general strategies are all pragmatic with nearly zero implications for idealism or group activism. However, they do reflect a form of group identification in that they construct the view that Chinese overseas share common predicaments as outsiders in the context of their host societies, and that faulty decision making affects not only the individual in trouble but also the reputation of the entire population of Chinese students abroad.

Knowing the system. Many COOCs saw the quandaries of Han and Tang partly as their inabilities to know the institutional system of American higher learning. So in their counseling, COOCs provided their understandings of the U.S. institutional system as well as some common social norms. The responses to the first case—Han's scholarship at Yale—were more focused on knowing institutional rules of the system. The reactions to the second case—student/adviser dispute—were more about knowing the power structure of the system. While some COOCs questioned the system, more offered insights and reality checks on how to cope with the system as individuals. In their responses, COOCs imply that knowing the system can help make one's expectation of the system more “realistic” and keep one from overreacting to

something normal in the host culture but inapprehensible to the involved individuals.

For instance, some commentators pointed out that it was quite “normal” for a graduate student to lose scholarship during the process of transferring from one school to another. Another commentator, who criticized Han for the unnecessary controversy she created, offered insights on institutional structure and rules:

Chinese students sometimes have such problem. They get into the Department and quickly change their minds. They fire their American professors, who might later become reluctant to accept other Chinese students. Ms. Han might be just such type of student. Normally a department in a School of Arts and Sciences would be responsible for grant money, and the faculty in Engineering or Professional school would be responsible for financial aid because they have their own grant money. So by transferring from the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Science to the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (a kind of professional school), Ms. Han lost the promised financial aid, which is quite normal. I bet her original professor must feel unhappy about this. If I were the professor, I would dislike her (commentary to Ren Zai Bei Mei, Oct 23, 2005).

The idea that institutional norms might not be written up as codes is seen as common sense, something that does not have to be culturally specific, as one commentator stated: “Changing departments and losing money. No exceptional even in BeiDa and Tsinghua (two prime Universities in China).” Hence, according to commentators, the fuss Ms. Han created was absolutely unnecessary and potentially harmful to the reputation of Chinese overseas students.

In respect to the second case, the recognition of the hierarchy in U.S. higher education is deemed crucial for Chinese students who should strive to get along with the individual faculty members. Many commentators predicted that Ms. Tang’s battle against her advisor would be doomed, something in vain like “an egg hitting on a

rock,” because she failed to realize the “tyranny of the psychotic professor” and could not recognize the unavoidable partiality for faculty members in the U.S. education system. Several commentators generalized the particular profile of Tang’s advisor into a stereotypical category to offer seemingly “insightful” admonition against third-world female professors: “It was wrong to find a female advisor. It was worse to find an Indian female professor.” They considered Tang’s quandary as consequence of the particular gender, culture, and status properties of her advisor:

I believe what she (Tang) said is all true. Professors with other cultural backgrounds—especially those from India, China, and Arabic countries—cannot attract American students, who don’t care about them. They dare not to confront American students due to their limited language competence and cultural background (commentary to Duo Wei Shi Bao, Aug 22, 2006).

Some commentators advised others to avoid third-world female professors in U.S. graduate schools because they can become “psychotic” and “vindictive” after years of “double-oppression” as female and foreigner. One commentator shared a personal experience:

I had a similar experience. My truthful insight is that foreign professors are normally harder to get along with than American professors, especially those from the third world. That’s probably because they had experienced some extra and prolonged hardships when they were students, so after they gained their professorships, they would become meaner (commentary to Duo Wei Shi Bao, Aug 22, 2006).

According other COOCs, finding an Asian Indian female professor was the unequivocal source of all sufferings for Tang. As one stated:

As known by all global citizens, Hindus are the meanest of all species. They have old feuds with the Chinese. Don’t ever look for an Indian advisor. My husband was tortured extravagantly by his Ph.D. advisor who is a Hindu, and

our whole family suffered so much during those darkest days (commentary to Duo Wei Shi Bao, Aug 22, 2006).

Another commentator further referred to China-India relationship in elaborating the cause of the personal dispute:

According to my experience, the saddest of all is that she had a Hindu advisor. As everyone knows, most Hindu intellectuals despise Chinese from the inside of their bones. In the past, they disdained the Chinese because the Chinese were weak. Now they dislike the Chinese because they are jealous of a rising China. Chinese students are too smart, too capable, and they're afraid of the Chinese students would become potential threat for their positions in academia. Tang's quandary is just a manifestation of the deep cultural feuds between China and India. So change of venue is the only option (commentary to Duo Wei Shi Bao, Aug 22, 2006).

As these examples suggest, discussion of the U.S. graduate education's hierarchy conveyed, through biased and prejudiced references to gender and national differences, a sense of group cohesion along the lines of nationality. And at the pragmatic level, these specific cases offer precautionary advice to other Chinese.

Learning to accommodate. With the recognition of the system's structural characteristics, the next prescribed strategy to follow is to deliberately align oneself with the powerful and seek alliances with hosts, precisely because Chinese students might be more prone to be oppressed. For commentators, these adjustments require that Chinese students gain awareness of how they are viewed by those who can determine their fates and, more importantly, use interpersonal communication skills purposively to achieve cultural accommodation.

For instance, one COOC suggested helping one's professor with some off-duty, small tasks— like locating articles or copying papers—as a useful practice that is considered absolutely normal for graduate students in the U.S., including American

students. Other commentator described Tang's quandary in these terms: "Another nerdy Chinese who doesn't know the value of people skills. She should learn how Chinese brownnose their bosses back in China." Likewise, another COOC stated:

This girl student is apparently very naïve and immature. She doesn't know when to lower the head and tuck the tail. Those small errands she ran for her professor are nothing compared to what I had done for my professor. He even made me cook Chinese food. He got to eat Chow Mein while I had to bite bread. Well, obviously, that was a blatant, fawning ingratiation. But why shouldn't we (commentary to Duo Wei Shi Bao, Aug 22, 2006)?

This idea that students need to accommodate, because of their marginalization as cultural others, goes hand-in-hand with a reiteration of unequal and exploitative relations as a norm in the academic institution:

Like my professor, who's Chinese, supposedly without any discrimination or cultural bias, also chased us like a German shepherd and made us do everything. It's quite normal for us to get email at midnight. Frankly, I think this Professor is just a bit eccentric. But nothing she did to Tang sounds too extravagant . . . As a student, you should learn to communicate with her more frequently instead of evading her like plague (commentary to Duo Wei Shi Bao, Aug 22, 2006).

For COOCs, accommodation is a strategy that calls for wisdom and willpower beyond the academe for interpersonal skills can make one more competitive in any context.

As suggested by one COOC, Tang must consider the consequences of any act, apply people skills, and "befriend the chair or dean and let him understand your position.

The more people you can befriend, the better your situation would be. Don't just complain."

Modesty or keeping a low profile. Perhaps because they felt uncomfortable with the high publicity of the two cases, some COOCs in these forums elaborated on

the importance of modesty and humbleness as a behavioral principle and cultural strategy for the Chinese overseas. Keeping a low profile is a strategy deemed to facilitate adaptation and accommodation to a host culture. One commentator pointed out that, like ingratiation, modesty is a distinctive element of “Chinese wisdom,” a collective trait that should not be foreign to Chinese students: “As a Chinese, you really should tuck your tail between your legs and realize that modesty is a tactic of self-protection as well as an attitude of scholarship (commentary to Ren Zai Bei Mei, Oct 23, 2005).” Some of the specific tactics discussed for keeping a low profile included: 1) maintaining proper expectations of others; 2) increasing self-awareness via self-evaluation and self-criticism; 3) stressing the value of avoidance (of conflict) and endurance (of hardship). These tactics form a strategy directed toward achieving a goal of adaptation as well as self-improvement.

Interestingly, the advice given by COOCs to keep a low profile resonates with one of the fundamental principles of cultural identification inspired by Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987). From this perspective, the mental stability of an intercultural communicator is influenced by the discrepancy between evaluation of one’s self in the perception of oneself and that from the others. In order to maintain mental stability in intercultural context, during the process of cultural identification one should keep a relatively modest self-evaluation and low expectations of others’ evaluations of oneself. Through this strategy, it is proposed, one can manage the frustration caused by intercultural differences. As one commentator reminded others:

Never self elevate as if you are someone. Out of home, come here (to this foreign land), we're all NOBODY. Know the story of 'sleep on the brushwood and taste the gall-bladder' [or *WoXin ChangDan*, a common Chinese idiom from a historical story]. Live your life (commentary to Ren Zai Bei Mei, Oct 23, 2005).

The practice of self-criticism as part of keeping a low profile generated discussion in the forum. Among those who pointed out weaknesses of Chinese overseas students, unwillingness to learn English and dishonesty were mentioned. One commentator stated: "Most of the time, English communication is just secondary, while the primary problem is always about the credibility of Chinese (commentary to Ren Zai Bei Mei, Oct 23, 2005)." On this issue, one grouchy commentator criticized the whole community of Chinese overseas students in the United States:

. . . a group of dishonest people once educated in a rotten society [referring to Mainland China] . . . the Chinese could learn good English for the written tests but they just don't want to practice. Everyone is motivated to take some short-cuts to the high scores in those standardized tests . . . Now in the real academic setting, their high scores mean nothing. Han is just one case. I support returning more of those students and then we will learn what is the reality and what is the cost of dishonesty (commentary to Ren Zai Bei Mei, Oct 23, 2005).

Another commentator highlighted notions of cultural shame:

When I was in the New Oriental School [a famous private English school headquartered in Beijing], I often heard one instructor boast how he helped others take telephone interviews [from admission committees of universities in English-speaking countries]. All [including myself] adorned him as if he were a superhero. None of us ever thought that was a fraud, stately and shameless cheating. Now when I recalled that scene, I can't help but feeling shameful (commentary to Ren Zai Bei Mei, Oct 23, 2005).

Another set of tactics within the strategy keeping a low profile is avoidance of conflict and endurance of hardships if conflict cannot be avoided. Avoidance is a tactic that stresses precaution and is linked by COOCs to personal qualities like wisdom, persistence, and tenacity. One commentator posited avoidance as indication

of one's emotional intelligence: "Not sufficient EQ (Emotional Quotient). She should avoid conflict by all means and endure the hardship until graduation. Then there will be more space, as deep as the ocean and as high as the sky (commentary to Ren Zai Bei Mei, Oct 23, 2005)." Other COOCs emphasized tenacity and persistence as in: "After I read this note, I thought that she should have chosen another professor as her supervisor if possible or just get a master's degree. She can apply other university, too, if she really wants a Ph.D.," "Once she felt something wrong with the professor, she should have made decision to switch her early on," and "All Chinese should avoid such bad professors, and they [the bad professors] will eat what they planted before (commentaries to Ren Zai Bei Mei, Oct 23, 2005)."

When avoiding confrontation fails and conflict ensues, the advice of COOCs seems to underscore that endurance is the best strategy. As two commentators said in relation to Tang's situation:

If you don't have the option, then you would have to endure the hardships with great preparation, like my friend's husband, who's a free man now with his Ph.D., after so many years of oppression by his Hindu advisor. Don't just complain like a groaning wretched. After all you're just a student. Endurances perhaps your only option (commentary to Duo Wei Shi Bao, Aug 22, 2006).

For the Chinese overseas students, who are seen by the virtual community as the weakest of the weaklings at the bottom caste of the academic hierarchy, avoidance of conflict and endurance of hardships are strategies to survive in the foreign land and achieve academic success.

Stress individuality rather than group membership. According the reports, Han and Tang both tried to accuse the institution and individual faculty members in question of racial discrimination or cultural prejudice. However, the strategy of accusing others of discrimination did not tout much support in the virtual community. Interestingly, even though COOCs discourse implies the understanding that Chinese individuals face particular disadvantages and oppression, COOCs were reluctant to validate the idea that the two cases were related to racism or discrimination. Rather, they interpreted these cases as involving personality issues. Yet, they advised individuality and lessening attachment to Chinese culture as a strategy to avoid conflict based on the perception that: 1) Chinese identity is not an advantage in social negotiations and 2) in a Western country like the U.S., people usually see “thing-in-itself instead of seizing upon cultural membership to distort the truth.”

Personalization and lessening attachment to Chinese identity implies avoiding the politicization of issues. It is a strategy based on an individualistic reading of conflict situations. Two comments illustrate this position: “Ms. Han deserves some sympathy, but her problem can happen to anyone of any cultural background. She herself never said that she was racially discriminated,” and “Her personal academic ordeal has nothing to do with other Chinese students (commentary to Ren Zai Bei Mei, Oct 23, 2005).”

It may be argued that stressing individuality is a strategy that results from the fact that in foreign cultures, where Chinese groups form an often invisible and

marginal minority, identification with Chinese cultural membership is unlikely to facilitate the resolution of intercultural conflict. Thus, lessening the Chinese cultural core is a form of cultural identification that, though emphasizing individual differences, may simultaneously reflect COOCs' awareness of their disadvantaged position and status as a group in the cultures of overseas countries. Furthermore, this strategy raises the question of whether such sense of collective positioning in the context of Western societies may discourage the development of any group agenda for cultural activism, even in cyberspace.

In sum, the four cultural strategies identified in the responses to the two cases of academic quandaries are all directed to individual adaptation for survival and self-improvement. At the same time, these strategies reveal COOCs understanding of what it means to be member of the Chinese population outside China. Their messages suggest that for these commentators, the core of the Chinese cultural identity is not an advantageous property. Although this understanding could lead to collective action for fair treatment and social justice, the cultural advice given here by COOCs privileges the strategy of individual alignment with the mainstream and those in power as the only option for cultural adaptation. In the words of one commentator on Han's case: "the Chinese always like to imagine they are part of the White society and therefore alienate themselves from other oppressed social groups."

Ethnic/Racial Crimes against Chinese Victims

The area of life predicaments encompasses discussion of contemporary incidents where Chinese individuals were victims of hate crimes by members of other racial and ethnic groups. The crimes discussed took place in different parts of the world. Some examples of these crimes are: the pillaging of a Chinese community by villagers in Malawi, African, along with the circulation of rumors that Chinese businessmen killed one missing local girl for medical purposes (Ban Dao Chen Bao, Dec 15, 2005); the beating of four Chinese pupils by a mob of 40 Italian youngsters (Zhong Xin Wang, Feb 22, 2008); the brutal assault of Chinese vendors by local police in Spain (Zhong Guo Bao, Oct 26, 2009); the violent, physical confrontation between a group of Chinese overseas students and non-Chinese students at a for-profit international college in Canada (Zhong Xin Wang, Dec 11, 2007); and the killing of a Chinese Ph.D. in mathematics by four young locals in Melbourne, Australia (Zhong Xin Wang, May 10, 2009). These are among the incidents in which Chinese individuals were battered, insulted, and killed by individuals from other racial and ethnic groups. Some of these events were reported in major U.S. metropolitan areas like New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco (Ming Bao, May 23, 2007; Xing Dao Ri Bao, April, 21, 2010; Xing Zhou Ri Bao, April 22, 2010; Zhong Ping She, July 26, 2007; Zhong Xin Wang, May 21, 2007; Zhong Xin Wang, July 5, 2007). The mishaps experienced by Chinese people overseas create a dismal scenario of victimization, leading one commentator to bemoan: “We are so doomed, being beaten up everywhere. It seems that the whole world hates us.”

In effect, a close reading of the COOCs responses reveals that they identify with Chinese victims in a manifestation of group membership. The incidents appeal to a basic need for physical safety and cultural ascription as the responding COOCs, too, are Chinese living in foreign lands and surrounded by people with racial and ethnic backgrounds similar to that of the alleged perpetrators. In addition, COOCs' messages manifest a form of strategic identification that entails a sobering analysis of Chinese group characteristics, discussion of guiding values, and prescription of strategies. A significant part of the discussion offers rational interpretations of why and how these brutalities happened to the victims, with close reference to perceptions of the negative dimensions of the Chinese cultural identity. And beyond the sympathetic response and analysis of the Chinese predicament, COOCs engage in the discussion of values and strategies for managing situations of racial violence. Appealing to the values of cultural survival, endurance and self-improvement, four strategies emerge from the commentaries: 1) stressing avoidance and endurance; 2) improving cultural images; 3) separating individuality from sociality; and 4) strengthening Chinese voices in the host culture.

Stressing avoidance and endurance. Tactical avoidance of conflict and strategic endurance are stressed in these forums about incidents of Chinese victimization. Based on the perception that the Chinese overseas have a disadvantage in terms of demographic proportion and political power, the value of endurance and survival in the foreign context prevails in the discourse. The following examples

illustrate this pattern: “In a foreign country, even a law-biding Chinese would be bullied, oppressed or marginalized because nobody likes foreigners from the bottom of the heart. So let’s just endure.” For another commentator, out of China, a Chinese should be: prioritizing the principle of self-preservation and keeping trouble-free. Any minority group with less than 2 percent of the total local population would have zero political influence.”

The relatively isolated position of Chinese communities surrounded by local ethnic groups is another factor that curtails their capacity to complain, protest, or even to fight back against oppression and thus calls for endurance. One commentator explained the beating of Chinese students by peers from other racial/ethnic groups in Columbia College of Canada in this manner: “These Chinese kids are oftentimes in a position so much isolated that they divided people into just two groups – Chinese or non-Chinese. So in those conflicts, all non-Chinese become allies (against the Chinese).” In their discussion, COOCs seem to have a realistic understanding of the implications of being Chinese in a host society where the Chinese often have a hard time making alliances with other groups. Based on this understanding, avoidance and endurance are prioritized as a cultural strategy to cope with conflicts, especially with the dominant local groups.

Improving cultural images. Many COOCs attributed the cause of ethnic/racial crimes against Chinese individuals to the unattractiveness and powerlessness of Chinese culture in the host society. While citing Western media’s

negative portrayal of Chinese culture as contributing to the negative standing of the Chinese in host cultures, COOCs also made reference to how the behavior and physical characteristics of the Chinese overseas may be linked to their victimization. To cope with external social pressure and immanent physical threat, some COOCs proposed the strategy of maintaining, managing, and eventually improving the image of the Chinese in the host culture. Guided by the principle of self-improvement, the preferred tactics to win cultural respect from other groups were: 1) improving physical condition and self-defense skills with Kung Fu and other practices, and 2) increasing socio-cultural awareness through knowledge of social rules, norms, and etiquette. While the improvement of physical condition is seen as a tactic that can deter hostility and violence, acquiring social etiquette is seen as a way to ensure cultural acceptance and integration with other cultures.

Regarding brutal physical abuse against Chinese individuals by perpetrators with other racial and ethnic cultural backgrounds, commentators placed physicality and image at the center of the discussion and gave direct suggestions to improve body condition and build self-defense techniques. One commentator indicated:

For so many years, the Chinese had not become main targets of assaults because we are honest, and Chinese Kung Fu stars and movies had some deterring influence. Now [that the Chinese become easy targets] we need a new superhero like Bruce Lee or a Chinese grappling world champion to refuel the deterring influence. But this would be very difficult. I predict that there will be more incidents like this, please take good care of yourselves (commentary to Xing Zhou Ri Bao, April 22, 2010).

In traditional Chinese culture, one kind of ideal personhood for young people who are still growing is *Wen Wu Shuang Quan* or “being versed in both literary and martial

virtues.” In the online forums, some COOCs pointed out that contemporary Chinese people overseas are predominantly academic, nerdy and feeble, lacking physical strength and fighting will and, therefore, are becoming easy targets of the bullies. One commentator—self-identified *iamhereforfun*—who claimed to be a master of martial arts with training and street fighting experience—wrote: “You can’t say that the Chinese are not good and experienced fighters. But those who came to the [United] States are mostly not.” As an “experienced” fighter, this commentator offered tips to the “nerdy and gentle” Chinese overseas:

Effective physical fight, to a large degree, is a kind of ‘habit.’ You cannot be hard and fast if you don’t have such a habit (instinct) . . . Everybody, if you don’t have such a habit and if someone intends to hit you, you should first protect your front face immediately and hit back hard onto your opponent’s eyes and nose. You can also thwack his throat (but don’t be too hard or you can kill him) (commentary to Zhong Xin Wang, May 21, 2007).

Another COOC wrote:

It is useless to merely decry the bullies. We should build up our bodies and be prepared with some basic self-defense skills. Situated in that environment, the Chinese should carry some defense weapons such as sprays, knives, and batons. Even if you cannot overpower the offenders, with these gears you can make them suffer. Cowardice can only make you more vulnerable (commentary to Xing Dao Ri Bao, April, 21, 2010).

As many stressed, besides self-protection, social awareness is much needed for the maintenance of a positive cultural image and for cultural survival in the host culture. One commentator nicknamed *Old Cowboy* suggested: “While we enhance our ability and skills for self-protection and self-defense, we should do more things for the public benefit and respect other ethnic groups (commentary to Zhong Ping She, July 26, 2008).” Another commentator even told a story about the parsimony of some

Chinese residents as expressed by non-Chinese neighbors: “Chinese should really take care of their public image . . . Other ethnic groups complain a lot about the Chinese who are stingy and selfish (commentary to Zhong Ping She, July 26, 2008).” And one commentator advised all Chinese overseas: “Outside China, we must keep our graceful manner and follow local etiquette not to give excuses to the others . . . best if we are all mindful and know the rules, so nobody can rag us (commentary to Xing Dao Ri Bao, April, 21, 2010).” COOCs understand that people seen as physically weak and socially inept by others are more prone to be bullied. To these commentators, by being physically strong, socially wise, and mindful of cultural etiquette, Chinese individuals can improve their personal and collective image and thus minimize the chances of intercultural conflict.

Stressing individuality. Separating individuals from their social conditions has the effect of downplaying the cultural representativeness of individual cases and undercut the nationalistic passion or patriotic sentiment among the forum participants. Through their messages, some COOCs appealed to the value of individualism in efforts to avoid the cultural shame evoked by reported cases of Chinese victimization in foreign contexts. These tended to personalize the issues and cutting off the cultural connection. As one commentator stated:

. . . not all Chinese in the United States would be targets of prejudice, discriminated, or brutalized like this. Don’t be so jittery. Stop abducting the whole Chinese overseas community for personal interest. People should respect law and order everywhere. Don’t blame others. It’s just matter of some personal ordeal (commentary to Zhong Xin Wang, Dec 11, 2007).

Another attempted to depoliticize the incidents in this way:

. . . not a political conflict, why wave Chinese national flags, sing the Chinese national anthem? The last time in Europe, when the police were inspecting the illegal Chinese vendors, those Chinese were also 'holding high the flags' and 'singing loud the anthem,' which was totally ridiculous (commentary to Zhong Xin Wang, Dec 11, 2007).

For another commentator, if individual Chinese youngsters find themselves involved in gang violence and mob behavior, their actions should not lead to sympathy based on notions of patriotism:

. . . wasting their parents' corruption money, these spoiled young gangbangers developed their personal hobby of gang fighting, which is all right for them. But what's the point of waving national flags and singing national anthem? Please don't ever ruin the two words 'Chinese Patriotism (commentary to Zhong Xin Wang, Dec 11, 2007).'

In the perspective of these commentators, the sympathy evoked by individual cases of Chinese victimization is pointless, unnecessary, and even harmful to the reputation or image of Chinese culture. These commentators, in an individualistic and pragmatic manner, detach themselves from supportive involvement with other Chinese personal ordeals, even in the anonymous, emotional and virtual sphere of cyberspace.

Raising Chinese voices. In the discussion of victimization stories, many COOCs appealed to the value of dignity and expressed concerns for the limited participation of Chinese individuals in public debates in the host society. For some COOCs, the Chinese overseas are too reserved, humble, inactive, passive, and even timid to raise loud voices in benefit of their group. According to the analysis of some commentators, rather than stressing avoidance and endurance, Chinese people in the United States should organize public petitions and protests as a way to fight back against the oppression of dominant institutions and the bullying of other ethnic groups.

One called for changing the situation by drawing on the American proverb “Crying baby gets milk first.” Another commentator referred to a series of Chinese victimizations in the San Francisco Bay area as an opportunity for the Chinese to make their loud voices be heard by the U.S. public:

We must defend our dignity. In North America, from our experience with our children’s education, we know discrimination is a fact of the matter and the louder you cry out, the more respect and attention you get. We must utilize this opportunity to cry out for our dignity (commentary to *Xing Zhou Ri Bao*, April 22, 2010).

Here, solidarity and organization are the basis for raising Chinese voices. While many COOCs were just debating the causes and consequences of the brutalities against Chinese, others tried to organize petitions and protests. For example, a commentator self-identified as *RenRenRen* (three homophonic Chinese characters meaning humanity, endurance, and tenacity) made this call for action:

I hope that all Chinese in California or the entire North America rise up and speak out loudly in the form of online petitions and protest. Our purpose is to make the legal system put the perpetrators on death row . . . We all should realize that if Westerners still deem Chinese easy targets, then next victim could be any of us (commentary to *Xing Zhou Ri Bao*, April 22, 2010).

RenRenRen asked: “Who knows some good blogs? How can we connect with more Chinese?” Many commentators gave positive responses to this posting, and the commentator offered his advice:

I feel: 1, we all agree to take action and avow determination to express Chinese indignation and uphold dignity; 2, we don’t want to intensify the existing tension among ethnic groups for this matter; 3, we are in unison regarding the severe punishment of perpetrators. For action, we need some principal guidelines: 1, for political negotiation, we must aim high to punish the perpetrators with death penalty; 2, do not engage in any racial accusation . . . the inhumane perpetrators are against all human beings, and our

Chinese people need to win support from other racial/ethnic groups including the Blacks; 3, our ultimate goal is to deliver the message that Chinese people are not easy targets for someone in a bad mood; 4, avoidance and endurance can make us look good only if nobody dares to bully us any more . . . Here's my call for action: 1, I propose to organize a signature petition among Chinese all over the U.S. to make our convincing and powerful voice be heard; 2, hold a county-wide parade protesting against racial hatred, the brutalization of innocent people, and social violence. We need to get people of other ethnic backgrounds involved. 3, people's sympathy for the victims and indignation against the perpetrators would be the basis of our success (commentary to Xing Zhou Ri Bao, April 22, 2010).

This commentator was looking for support and to engage COOCs in action-planning rooted in a high sense of identification with Chinese group membership. *RenRenRen* reached out to other Chinese through online discussion and attempted to transform indignation into political action. But I was unable to confirm if protests were organized in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

In sum, in discussions about victimization COOCs responded with cultural strategies that appealed to the values of adaptation, endurance, self-improvement, modesty, individualism, and dignity as guiding principles for survival in foreign contexts. The proposals reflect how COOCs enacted their positionality as a minority group that is isolated, powerless, physically weak, socially awkward, and reserved. The first three strategies—avoidance of conflict, improving cultural images and stressing individuality—are pragmatic and directed to individual application to help manage identity conflicts at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. The fourth is more idealistic and political, rooted in the desire of some COOCs to use group membership to change unfavorable social and cultural conditions faced by Chinese overseas.

Desperately Overreacting: Chinese Perpetrators

Stories about Chinese perpetrators who committed crimes outside China sparked more heated discussion than stories of Chinese victimization because the cases are more rare, sensational, and oftentimes high-profiled. If when discussing victimization COOCs focused on Chinese weaknesses and isolation, when discussing perpetrators they focused on mental health or moral flaws. I selected two high-profile cases of Chinese perpetrations that occurred in the United States to illustrate this pattern. Each case generated a series of headline news stories and blog entries that attracted a wide range of participants leaving numerous comments. The two incidents provoked the reaction of COOCs who seemed to agree that Chinese perpetrators cause cultural shame and harm the cultural image of the Chinese in the host society. The first case is about a Chinese Silicon valley computer engineer, Jinghua Wu, who on November 14, 2008, killed three executives of the company that laid him off (Duo Wei She, Nov 11, 2008; Zong He Zi CBS5, Nov 15, 2008). The second case is about a Chinese doctor, Lishan Wang, who killed his former supervisor on April 26, 2010 (Qiao Bao, April 27, 2010; Shi Jie Ri Bao, April 30, 2010; Wenxue City Best Blogs, June 4, 2010). In many of the comments, COOCs shared their interpretations of the incidents with clear reference to how the Chinese cultural identity operates in a foreign context. Based on their perspectives and interpretations, many prescribe strategies to maintain mental health and reserve spiritual energy.

The two perpetrators, Wu and Wang, are seen as desperate individuals facing personal material losses and problems with life attitudes, inadequate social skills, and lack of spiritual pursuit. Although their criminal behaviors are not considered representatives of Chinese people in general, COOCs deemed their extreme actions a reaction to conditions of oppression in the foreign, hierarchical, and competing work environment. Since those conditions may be common to other COOCs, the strategies proposed aim to prevent extreme reactions. Appealing to the value of endurance and self-improvement, COOCs offered the strategies of 1) changing life attitudes; 2) pursuing spirituality—putting more weight on spirituality than on materiality; and 3) developing social skills.

Changing life attitudes. Psychological endurance is the ability to maintain a positive mental attitude even under the weight of a negative reality. In the analysis of the actions of perpetrators, many COOCs agreed that it was not life pressures but the uncontrollable anger felt by the perpetrators what triggered the tragedies: the anger that originated in the killers' frustrating interactions with their victims. They generally agreed that one's psychological endurance can be strengthened by changing life attitudes and exercising self, social, and cultural awareness. In the view of COOCs, a positive attitude entails developing not only realistic expectations but also proper behavioral guidelines and effective interpersonal relations. Interestingly, many COOCs used the Chinese idiom *Neng Qu Neng Shen* or "bendable therefore expandable" to refer to the attitudes and ideal personhood that can enhance the

psychological endurance of marginalized individuals with limited social support and power. Tolerance, empathy, avoidance, and transcendence are basic components of such flexible life attitude and flexible personality. The COOCs' online discussions of strategies to develop endurance incorporate these notions. For example, one commentator used the following analogy to stress flexibility:

I believe many of us have experienced similar unfair treatments at work. We are just a group of yellow monkeys, leaving our own territory and searching for fruits along with white monkeys. Our mentality and physique need to be extremely tough. Since we are in the other's territory, to survive, we have to prove that we are useful. Not just pick our own fruits. We should also pick fruits for the others without any complaint (commentary to Wenxue City Best Blogs, June 4, 2010).

Another COOC prescribed the attitude needed to make it in the "other's territory":

Pretend that you are in a prison and your supervisor is the warden, who can beat you up and get away trouble-free. At work, we should be able to play with the powers with ease and peace. DON'T GET MAD, GET EVEN. Don't feel bad, take it easy. Nothing wrong with being flexible and flattering (commentary to Wenxue City Best Blogs, June 4, 2010).

One commentator focused on avoidance using this approach: "With our cultural background, we should try all means to avoid conflict. Sometimes we need to take shit and probably be the shit (Wenxue City Best Blogs, June 4, 2010)." In another example, a commentator stressed endurance and tolerance by referring to his or her own career experience:

I have been working in an American IT industry for over 10 years and once encountered seven or eight managers, the worst of whom was a female from mainland China. Her jealousy and meanness were both first-rate. It was nightmare working under her. She was probably the only person I once hated. But now, everything is over and I don't feel the hatred anymore because I don't want to punish myself with the hateful feeling. She was perhaps just pathetic (commentary to Wenxue City Best Blogs, June 4, 2010).

Developing a loose attitude based on low expectations, humor, and awareness of the inevitable favoritism of employers toward members of the dominant groups in the host society is also seen as something that can help people gain psychological endurance. For COOCs, the deliberate lowering of social expectations and increased self-esteem can make people more tenacious in dealing with hardship.

Strengthening psychological endurance by pursuing spirituality. In the discussion of endurance and life attitudes, many COOCs approach spirituality as the way to transcend the frustration generated by the material world. As some pointed out, the material hardships one experiences are the result of loss of income and status (as was the case with the Chinese perpetrators) or of comparing one's past or present economic situation to the situation of others. But since controlling or changing material conditions is not always possible, COOCs stressed the need to overlook material loss and rely on spiritual abundance to maintain a healthy attitude and equilibrium in life. As one commentator stated when discussing the desperation that drove Wu to commit a crime: "We all need to be unadorned materially and insatiable spiritually. Let's have more spiritual pursuit and less economic comparison (commentary to Zong He Zi CBS5, Nov 15, 2008)." In the heat of discussions, another commentator clarified the necessity of separating material success and spiritual success, and proposed this strategy to manage frustrating workplace relationships:

Success in the eyes of ordinary people is superficial, materialistic. If one is easily gratified by material satisfaction but neglects spiritual pursuit, he will

never be happy. So I think success should be both material and spiritual. In responding to the case (Wu), I want to admonish those with a background similar to Wu's that spiritual and moral pursuits should coincide with money-making. With spiritual and moral preparation, you can treat the others with tolerance and let go hatred (commentary to Zong He Zi CBS5, Nov 15, 2008).

Although the majority of comments do not associate spirituality with any particular religious affiliation, a couple of commentators linked spiritual pursuit to religious faith. One tried to promote optimism by alluding to the precept that God gives people no more than what they can handle: "Be optimistic . . . because we are all in the grip of the heaven (God)." Another believed that a fundamental tenet of Christianity is the notion that discrimination and oppression are ubiquitous and people are born with original sins; therefore, tolerance and forgiveness are stressed as key attitudes. For these commentators, when material loss or hardship becomes a challenge, psychological endurance is critically related to the ability to distinguish between materiality and spirituality and opt for stressing the latter.

Developing social skills. In addition to, or in lieu of, pursuing spirituality, many COOCs stressed the importance of developing social skills for mental stability and psychological endurance. Developing social skills was seen as having awareness of local social and cultural contexts and the ability to communicate in intercultural environments. However, COOCs also seemed to acknowledge that people living in other countries as travelers, immigrants or sojourners tend to have limited social awareness, language skills, and intercultural competencies, even though they might be mindful of the problem and be deliberately studying the local cultures. For instance, when discussing the cases of the two Chinese perpetrators, some commentators

argued that the most important aspect of social awareness was the understanding of the “legal baseline.” As one commentator expounded, laws are objective guidelines that can protect individual citizens:

In the legal society . . . sentimental reasoning is only secondary because one hundred people could have one hundred sets of sentimental reasons. If you want to work in the U.S., it is mandatory to accumulate some knowledge of labor laws. You should be able to protect yourself with knowledge of laws and then you would have some foundational baseline to survive without violating the laws (commentary to Zong He Zi CBS5, Nov 15, 2008).

Then, the same commentator uses his or her experience to show how using institutional rules can protect one’s interests:

Whenever my boss wants to trick me, I feel confident and assertive to handle him. So I never get mad and even; now he knows that he has to provide me with great reference. Remember: let your boss provide you a Working Evaluation Performance every year. If the company still wants to continue employing you, the evaluation would normally be very good (until one day they don’t want you, when the evaluation would normally be very contradictory). Keep all the evidence of unfair treatment or other misdemeanors of the company for some day when you might need to fight back (commentary to Zong He Zi CBS5, Nov 15, 2008).

In online forums, awareness of the social context also includes understanding of the prevalent social ethos and hierarchies. For instance, one commentator asserted that lack of sympathy for “weaklings” characterizes the American cultural tradition:

The mental oppression of weaklings in areas unprotected by the laws is rather truculent, especially for those marginalized and isolated individuals who have a hard time fitting into the society and can sometimes be mentally disoriented and act abnormally (commentary to Wenxue City Best Blogs, June 4, 2010).

Another commentator stressed the perception of the structural hierarchy that prevails in the U.S.:

In the U.S., the boss is always right. Respecting the boss is respecting the system. Even if your boss is just a monkey sitting over there, he is still your

boss. Americans (White men) are so good at groveling: they can behave like the grandchildren of their supervisors, obeying them anytime at school and work. This is the Western culture. It takes time (for the Chinese) to understand such unchallenged hierarchical system (commentary to Wenxue City Best Blogs, June 4, 2010).

These forms of advice serve to warn a Chinese audience who might have unrealistic expectations about presumed equity and egalitarian in the U.S., and to discourage any foolhardy challenges against authority.

Besides workplace hierarchy, the importance of managing interpersonal relations among co-workers was another topic addressed in the forums. Some commentators described workplace relationships as rivalries rather than team work; as one commentator put it: "... the company sometimes has to constantly lay off staff, and the employees are in life-or-death competition with each other." Another commentator compared the workplace to a battlefield: "The workplace is like a battlefield. We can't be so foolhardily rushing out without inspecting the topography and finding shelters. Survival is the first priority. You want to survive, so do anybody else (Wenxue City Best Blogs, June 4, 2010)." Alluding to the principle of smart fight in the workplace, one commentator cited a modified version of Mao Tse Tung's ideas on guerrilla warfare:

We fight if there's a contest, we walk if there's no contest, and we take shit if we cannot even walk away. You can only become somebody after taking a lot of shit. A smart guy chooses to fight his own battles. It is groovy to leave the enemy unharmed but our life goal is not to harm anyone (Wenxue City Best Blogs, June 4, 2010).

Other COOCs discussed how favoritism and discrimination in the workplace can be managed by knowing how to work with the communication styles of

individuals. They emphasized communication competency as a key to improve one's social life, since for Chinese overseas, in general, "communication is a big problem" and many life predicaments are caused by inadequate people's skills and language proficiency in the host culture. One commentator described the problem in this manner:

I have one admonishment (for Chinese overseas): never be too proud of yourself. When working in a foreign land, our problems include proving not just our intelligence but also our communication competency, like mastery of the foreign language and understanding of the foreign culture . . . Everyone with working experience in North America knows that language is a big obstacle. No problem with the work, but never easy to connect with other people. Interpersonal relationships are critically important (commentary to Shi Jie Ri Bao, April 30, 2010).

In sum, individual cases of Chinese perpetration triggered the process of online collective cultural identification. Although the strategies for cultural survival offered are multiple and sometimes at odds, these reflect some underlying, common perceptions of the positioning of the Chinese as a marginal group facing unfavorable work environments with limited political, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual resources to cope with cultural differences. COOCs tended to stress personal traits in the prescription of a relaxed, flexible, edgeless life attitude apt to tolerance, avoidance, empathy, and transcendence of conflict. For COOCs and the cultural group they represent, survival seems to be always the first priority in lands that require a long time and tremendous effort to be regarded as home.

COOCs' prescription of strategies also allows exploration of how processes of identification interconnect individuality and sociality, materiality and spirituality.

On the one hand, COOCs' attempt to distinguish the Chinese perpetrators from their group, seeing the cause of criminal acts in individual problems such as unfit personality or social maladjustment. On the other hand, their discussions and cultural advice in effect identify the situation of perpetrators with one that the entire Chinese group can relate to. Their comments serve to meditate the group's particular position in host cultures when they stress that a disadvantageous status can potentially affect any member of the group. Yet, COOCs seldom envision a unified struggle to advance the position of the Chinese group and instead focus on the necessity of enhancing individual social skills and cultural accommodation. In this respect, cultural identification among members of this virtual community features an interplay of individuality and sociality, in which individual inadequacy is linked to social inability. With the distinction of materiality and spirituality, some COOCs prioritize spirituality over materiality in the management of life predicament. But for most, a recognition of Chinese cultural group's disadvantageous social position in the host culture leads to emphasize individual self-improvement through cultural and social awareness and communication competency rather personal faith or political activism to empower the Chinese community in the host society. Thus although the problems identified may have social and material conditions, the solutions tend privileged individual and spiritual dimensions of identity.

Chapter Summary and Conclusions

COOCs' responses to stories of life predicaments reflect how they dealt with unpleasant aspects of life abroad and reflected on Chinese cultural identity through the exchange of experiences, insights, and strategic advice. In doing so, they enacted a sense of group membership and positioning vis-à-vis the dominant cultures in their adopted societies. As the analysis above shows, the strategies advised were not mutually exclusive but interrelated and point toward the intersection of identity properties.

In commenting stories of the life predicaments of other Chinese overseas, COOCs engaged in strategic cultural identification, defined here as communication acts that show awareness of existing and potential obstacles and challenges in intercultural interaction and feature strategic advice for coping with the perceived negative dimensions of one's identity. In effect, in the forums examined COOCs debated some of the negative aspects of their cultural identity, such as national disgrace and tendency to victimization. In their comments, COOCs shared a realistic assessment of the social positioning of Chinese individuals living abroad and offered pragmatic approaches to survive and thrive as Chinese individuals in foreign contexts. Through candid, sincere, emotionally intense, and compassionate messages, COOCs generally identified with the situations experienced by the Chinese subjects profiled in the stories discussed—even when they did not approve or sympathized with the subject's individual actions or decisions. COOCs manifested a sense of shared Chinese cultural membership in these forums through the recognition of the

disadvantaged position of Chinese overseas in the social hierarchies of their host countries and the acknowledgement that they have had or could have similar intercultural experiences as Chinese living abroad. This manifestation of cultural attachment and group conscience to manage conflicts constitutes a form of strategic identification.

It is important to note that COOCs' strategic identification exhibits a certain degree of complexity resulting from the various personal perspectives and vantage points of participating commentators. For instance, while some saw problems fundamentally as individual inadequacy, others spoke of structural barriers caused by the group's lack of power and negative cultural image. Therein, some proposed cultural strategies oriented to self-improvement through individual intercultural communication competency while others developed cultural strategies stressing collective efforts to improve group cultural image, such as raising the Chinese voices in the host society. Likewise, while some believed that prioritizing spirituality over materiality could help overcome frustration and oppression, others stressed the improvement of social and interpersonal skills as the strategy to avoid or solve conflicts in the intercultural context. However, despite the diverse positions taken by COOCs, the proposed cultural strategies highlight certain points of identification that give a sense of cohesion to the members of this virtual community. These may be summarized as follows.

The discourse analyzed featured instances of COOCs sympathetic support for other Chinese subjects facing the predicaments of life abroad. This positive identification with other Chinese overseas shows indicators of group conscience and cultural attachment that gives the virtual community a sense of cohesiveness. Binding them as a group is the awareness of the disadvantaged social position and negative cultural image of Chinese individuals and groups in the sociocultural contexts of host societies. Notwithstanding the fervent discussions showing group solidarity and cohesiveness as the dominant trend, some texts also reveal cultural detachment when COOCs are reluctant to identify with their Chinese compatriots by relying on individualistic approaches to life predicaments. In this sense, one may argue that while the Internet helps facilitate the communal connection among COOCs, it also allows for detached spectatorship as it maintains physical distance and anonymity.

The online discourse on life predicaments also featured a motivation to help others avoid conflict and succeed in new societies. When discussing how to cope with cultural challenges, COOCs showed a general inclination toward realistic and practical approaches to intercultural conflict. In the prescription of strategies to cope with the situation, COOCs suggested the moderation of the individual's perception of her or his aptitudes and the setting of realistic expectations when defining goals. Such worldview leads to strategies directed to detachment from the Chinese cultural core and self-improvement rather than idealistic activism. In this sense, messages stressing

value of detachment and self-improvement indicate the COOCs' general predilection for flexible and resilient attitudes toward life.

In terms of the interplay of structural dimensions of identity enacted in these forums, COOCs' discourses on cultural strategies tend to differentiate primarily between individuality and sociality, with a general tendency to privilege individual solutions to life predicaments. In specific cases, COOCs posited that individuality (for instance, a personality flaw, attitude or decision) and sociality (for example, a negative cultural image or racial discrimination) can both be the causes of a life predicament. However, with more emphasis on cultural detachment and self-improvement, COOCs generally favored solutions at the individual level. In sum, COOCs' strategic cultural identification suggests the cultivation of cultural detachment and self-improvement through lessening cultural core and stressing individuality. These strategies are offered as ways to manage frustration, maintain mental health, and improve social status.

CHAPTER VI: TACKLING IDEOLOGICAL CLASHES AND POSITIONAL IDENTIFICATION

As we may have expected, the one dimension of cultural identification that generated the most intense interaction and jarring comments among contributors to the online forums was the ideological debate on the position of China and Chinese culture in the changing global context. This chapter focuses on how Chinese overseas online commentators (COOCs) assume positions of identification in response to different topics and forms of ideological debate and, more specifically, addresses these questions: 1) What are the salient positions of identification constructed by Chinese commentators when reacting to publicized ideological exposition? 2) What are the salient positions of identification constructed by Chinese commentators when reacting to criticism posed by outgroup and ingroup critics of China? 3) What do the diverse positions enacted by COOCs on these ideological clashes reveal about processes of cultural identification?

Three Forms of Ideological Debate

For the purposes of discussion, the ideological debate among commentators will be mapped along the lines of three broad categories that emerged from the data analyzed and underscored different rhetorical emphases: debates where commentators responded to the ideological exposition on China's internal and external affairs; debates that focused on the response to criticism posed by non-Chinese sources (outgroup critics); debates that focused on the response to criticism posed by Chinese

sources (ingroup critics). Ideological exposition refers to discourse demonstrating some particular ideological positions without explicit criticism against Chinese cultural membership. Outgroup critics were identified as sources with clear cultural memberships other than Chinese. Ingroup critics were identified as sources with clear Chinese cultural membership. Each category of debate was coded in forums that covered different topics of interest to online commentators. Among the most popular topics—measured in terms of number and length of responses to news articles posted on the Web site—were the environment, human rights, democracy, Chinese-Western tensions, China’s relationship with Tibet, and the Beijing Olympics in 2010. Through the engagement of multiple topics within these categories of debate, the virtual community showed its internal divisions as well as some common patterns of identification.

Based on a close reading of the data selected, this chapter presents three main propositions. First, that the ideological positioning of COOCs nearly always relates to processes of cultural identification because in tackling ideological differences these individuals struggle to construct and negotiate their complex identities. In the online debates we encounter how members of this virtual community construct a sense of self and others through ideological positioning, while enacting varying degrees of cultural attachment to Chinese society and culture. Secondly, the data also suggest that a salient influence in such negotiation of identity among Chinese living overseas are the contending perceptions of China’s global position and international relations—

particularly the China-Western relations—and how these influence their personal and social lives. Third, the findings also illuminate how the construction and enactment of identity involves the activation of multiple points of identification, often simultaneously: individuality, sociality, materiality, and spirituality, as dimensional properties of identity defined earlier.

One of the central propositions in this chapter is that through the ideological positioning that takes place in the interplay of internal divisions and clashes with external sources, members of this virtual community enact a form of cultural identification that I have labeled positional identification. This is a particular form of identification with Chinese cultural membership that is enacted through the assertion of a stable position in the ideological spectrum, the argumentation over the righteousness of such position, and the rhetorical elaboration of the position with the goal of influencing the political views of others. By examining the dynamics of positional identification across topics and debates—and through arguments that ranged from personal views to those based on a group perspective or social analysis—one can observe how ideological positions constitute a continuum that runs from attachment to detachment from the cultural core of identification with Chinese cultural membership. The cultural core is defined in this research as a socially constructed and varying sense of affiliation with one's cultural membership that is communicated spontaneously and connects various dimensions of identity.

The analysis and discussion in this chapter is also informed by intergroup sensitivity effect research to explore whether COOCs' positional cultural identifications manifested in their commentary responses to ideological debates were influenced by the source of criticism. Intergroup sensitivity effect (Hornsey, 2002) suggests that people tend to have different responses to criticism of their group raised by critics from different group memberships. Previous research has suggested that in the reception of and response to criticism by individuals whose culture is being criticized, the source or origin of the critic matters (Hornsey, 2005). According to Hornsey et al (2006), members of a group under criticism are more concerned with the motive of critics than their credibility and the criticism per se. Further, members of a culture facing scrutiny are expected to respond to the claims of outgroup critics in more defensive manner than to the claims of members of the ingroup. For instance, outgroup critics are perceived as meaner, with explicit ideological motives representing conflicting group positions. Ingroup critics, on the other hand, are seen more as individuals with unique political agendas.

Before presenting the findings, it seems relevant to note some of the particular dynamics and context of online ideological debate in this particular virtual community. Direct observation of website interactions shows that ideological debates seem particularly appealing to the editorial staff of Wenxuecity.com. Their role in facilitating and even encouraging debate cannot be ignored. With the freedom of speech rights granted in host societies like the United States, the editors of

Wenxuecity.com seem to take an eclectic approach when posting articles that favor all sorts of political stances and ideological preferences—including dissidents' critiques of the current regime of China—in order to attract and maintain a wider range of readership among Chinese overseas. In this sense, although one could argue that COOCs' participation in these forums is therefore influenced and framed by editorial selection, the intensity of the exchanges and the diversity of views represented in the discussions suggest a great deal of spontaneity and volunteerism among COOCs. Undoubtedly, this exposure to a wider range of ideologies leads COOCs to present a more kaleidoscopic ideological picture in their online commentary when compared to the options available to their peers within China.

It is also important to observe that the personae of commentators and mediated relationships established among COOCs also influenced the dynamics of ideological debate. For instance, incompatible ideological stances that may not be manifested at all in face-to-face encounters in social or professional settings are likely to surface in anonymous online discussion because participants do not have to be cautious of the effects of these ideological clashes on their personal status (Dong, 2009). As made evident in the discussions examined, COOCs were not afraid of expressing their views or even offending others because personal or institutional bonds among them are not part of the context of interaction. At times, the hostility expressed seems to be intended to hurt an opponent's feelings and creating nasty exchanges in the virtual community. Triggered by specific topics, such malicious comments occurred more

frequently in this particular field of debate than in the discussions outlined in chapters four and five. In these instances, in the “feedback” section, registered users might ask the forum administrator to edit or “clean up” the page. In effect, the administrator of a section titled “News Express” has the authority and ability to delete any postings and even change wordings of some posts, either by his or her will or upon request from readers. Administrators have set policies regulating civility such as no profanity, no personal attack, no verbal threat, and no pornography, which are written and published as permanent headlines in the specific administrative forums like the “News Express.” Although the administrator of “News Express” has the ability to change postings, evidences show that such acts were limited among the researched texts.

Identification through Exposition of Ideological Positions

In this category, the debate was generated by COOCs’ responses to news articles published in other media and posted in Wenxuecity.com that featured news and opinion on China’s internal and external affairs, international relations, and status in the global society. Although the topics of the articles and the cultural background of the authors varied, COOCs comments to these articles features a common trait: they focused on the commentators’ exposition of her or his viewpoint to establish an ideological position. To analyze how COOCs’ ideological exposition connected to cultural identification, I selected four discussion forums around four news items that focused on the internal and external tensions that the Chinese government and nation are facing. The first article, titled “Attitude Firm: People’s Daily claims that China

will never adopt Tripartite System for separating power,” reproduces an editorial from China’s largest newspaper and party organ, *People’s Daily*, that clarified some issues about the “integrity” of China’s political system, including the regime’s official position on the separation of the executive, the legislative, and the judicial powers (Xing Dao Huan Qiu Wang, July, 2010). The second article was titled “China didn’t bite the bait: Most of Asian democratic nations are bleeding now” from a personal blog entry by an author using the identification name *Su Yi Qing Shan* or “Plain Clothes and Light Fan” (Zong He Xin Wen, May 26, 2010). In this blog entry, the author ponders the value and praxis of democracy in the current global hegemonic system while manifesting a clear pro-China or more precisely pro-current-regime of China position. The third article, titled “US Declares: Resorting to war cannot be eliminated to prevent the global power transition to China,” is a news report about a symposium on China’s rise and its influence on the United States held in the U.S., where Dr. Denny Roy—an expert on Northeast Asian security—admonished that the U.S. might resort to war to contain China’s movement towards becoming a dominant global power (Dong Fang Wang, Nov 9, 2009). The fourth article was titled “China dumbfounded by the US and Europe’s determination and scheme to ruin China thoroughly” is another opinion piece by an anonymous author who claimed that “China has been the Euro-American hegemonic powers’ long-term target of conquest” (Zhong Hua She Qu, Aug 17, 2009). In the first two articles, the authors stressed China’s internal tensions and how they related to flaws in its social system. The

authors of the last two articles construct scenarios that related to the increased external tensions China has to confront as a member of the global community.

COOCs' responses to these four articles are ideologically divided in terms of the commentators' defense/support and criticism/rejection of China and the Western powers in the exposition of their ideological stances. On the surface, the most noticeably ideological divide in online debates is between the "left conservative" and the "right liberal." This categorization, which defies the common sense constructed in the U.S. and other Western societies during the Cold War ideological battles, relates to the peculiar China's political spectrum. In China, the political stance of the left wing turns to be conservative in that it stresses the maintenance of the existing political system and traditional Chinese cultural values. On the other hand, the right wing advocates the necessity of liberal political reform and openness to changing cultural values. In the commentaries posted by COOCs, the left-wing political stance stressed cultural attachment and tended to exaggerate the ideological tensions between China and the West. Commentators with a right-wing political stance detached from their cultural core in a critical manner—often equating attachment to Chinese cultural membership with loyalty for the current regime of China—and embraced some universal values promoted in Western societies, such as democracy and individualism.

However, upon closer examination, such binary categories turn out to be too simplistic to fully describe the internal divisions manifested in COOCs' commentaries. For instance, a critical attitude against the current regime of China does not

necessarily imply a pro-West political stance. Another example is how the arguments advanced by the conservative left would normally reject the possibility and necessity of adopting a tripartite system to separate state powers, while a far right liberal commentator might also reject the tripartite system but argue from the standpoint of distrusting the character of Chinese citizens with some cynical remark like this: “The tripartite system is absolutely not feasible to China, because a roguish society has to be ruled by super rogues” (Xing Dao Huan Qiu Wang, July, 2010). The position enacted in this comment is related more to a critical attitude toward cultural membership than to the political stance.

Thus, COOCs’ ideological positions as manifested in their responses to the four articles mentioned earlier showed different levels of attachment to or distancing from the cultural core and seemed to be articulated in tandem with varying understandings of how external (foreign) tensions affected China. The following sections offer elaboration of two salient categories of positioning and their observed combinations: the critique of the Chinese system and the distancing from the cultural core, and the defense of China and the attachment to the core.

Criticizing the Chinese government and distancing from the cultural core.

Most of the commentators from the researched forums who were critical of current Chinese policies aimed at discrediting the legitimacy of government leaders and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by labeling them anti-democratic and insatiable exploiters of the Chinese people. For COOCs expressing criticism toward China,

China's current dictatorial regime is a source of shame that hampers their sense of cultural membership. Predominantly, these commentators enacted varying degrees of detachment from the Chinese cultural core. Many of these critical comments offer clear, direct criticism against Chinese Communist ideology; for instance: "people will realize that commies form a gigantic burden and tumor in Chinese society," "commies are the source of all Chinese sins," "since its birth, from head to toes, in every pore of Chinese communism is there full of blood and dirty stuff." In some of these comments, the democratic system that originated in the West is promoted as a universal value by COOCs who might rejoice at the fact that they are "not part of" the Chinese dictatorship. One commentator who denounced the hypocrisy of CCP that refuses to admit the nature of its dictatorship, made reference of the advantage of the Western political system in this manner:

. . . without competition and administrative rotation, the Chinese government is definitely a kind of dictatorship. The separation and balance of powers in Western society is multi-leveled . . . While the Western political system is not flawless and omnipotent, it is perhaps the best that human beings have ever had and on the path of continuous improvement and reform. Power separation and balance is the kernel, plus the specific procedures and methods to support the tripartite system (commentary to Xing Dao Huan Qiu Wang, July, 2010).

Then, the same commentator used his or her own knowledge of the U.S. society to support what he or she understood as the advantage of the U.S. system and thus built an ideological position:

For example, the US administrative law has a "dual-channel" principle that requires that both sides of a dispute must have the opportunity and capability to counterclaim: When there's the accusatory prosecutor, there must be the refuting defense attorney; the police can give people citations and people should be able to appeal; landlord could control the heating system in

wintertime and the renters could call the police if they feel the room temperature is too low. That is called a society (commentary to Xing Dao Huan Qiu Wang, July, 2010).

Another commentator used a sarcastic tone and a reference to a Chinese metaphor to refute the argument of pro-Chinese commentators that democracy is a conceptual pretext used by the West to control developing nations. This commentator stated:

The author seems to be suggesting that Chinese people don't need democracy, that the so-called democracy is a means applied by the West to control other countries. So our Chinese people should never try that. Following our own tradition, we should continue in a dictatorship because without dictatorship, China would be in chaos like the enlisted countries. If so, how could the social class the author represents continue to indulge itself in dissipation and debauchery? How could they continue their days of "*He Xie*" (meaning river crab, the Chinese homophones of harmony – a relatively new slogan promoted by CCP)? (commentary to Zong He Xin Wen, May 26, 2010).

Many comments showing criticism of the cultural core drew on the perception that tensions between China and the global community were increasing and threatening China's global position. For example, one commentator wrote: "China is too self-gratified. It wouldn't be too much more difficult for the U.S. to choke China to death than handling Japan and Iraq before." On the other hand, a seemingly pacifist commentator replied with an English-language commentary that called for Chinese non-engagement based on the view of China's military inferiority before the insurmountable military power of the Western hegemony:

No war, please . . . The best choice for China is "hibernating" like Japan and Germany for the sake of billions of lives. Give up military expansion. Work on economic development. Improve human rights and civilization . . . No one can beat up the U.S.A. Put all the force together (including Russia if it helps the Chinese), and China will not be able to defeat NATO. Know who is the real boss on the earth, you might survive better! Don't say that because you have some extra money, you will be the boss. The real boss is the one who knows how to use the money from your pocket as long as they want. Get it?

Chinese are not good at war at all. Don't try war, which is the worst choice for the Chinese people. If the CCP lead the Chinese to another war, the one billion Chinese people themselves will kick you out (commentary to Dong Fang Wang, Nov 9, 2009).

Comments like the one reproduced above stirred angry counterpunches from COOCs who defended China and also based their positions on the perception of China-U.S. tensions. One of them wrote:

Do you really think that Chinese people are afraid of your American nominal father and you SOB? Fifty years ago, (China) already beat up your American nominal ancestors in the Korean peninsula, not to say now. Come on! Let me castrate you – an American running dog (commentary to Zhong Hua She Qu, Aug 17, 2009).

This commentator's reply illustrated the position of those who showed attachment to the cultural core along with a perception that diminished the power of external influences to change China's regime. The exchange is one example of the type of inflammatory rhetoric exchanged between critics of China and nationalist COOCs that led to virtual oral brawls or wars of words.

Among COOCs whose expository comments focused on criticizing China, a few wrote comments that diminished the power of external pressures on China to stress that China's problems were internal. They criticized the hypersensitivity of some Chinese commentators who make much ado in their assessments of external tensions and conflict. For instance, one commentator posited: "China's structure causes China's stagnation, which has nothing to do with the Euro-American West" (commentary to Dong Fang Wang, Nov 9, 2009). For these commentators, the internal causes of China's contemporary ordeals are way much more critical than the external ones. For example, when responding to the fourth article about a Western

scheme to contain China, a commentator self-identified as *Amazing Moonlight*

Treasure Box stated:

Even as the most strategic nation in the world, the U.S. cannot reach such level of conspiracy as the article describes, as if the few countries allied with U.S. could handle China with such ease. China's problems are fundamentally internal problems. External causes can only be effective via internal causes. Only Chinese people can change China. Don't become cheap conspiracy theorists. Since childhood, we are inculcated with the idea that it was all the imperialist faults and the Party never did anything wrong. That was just a transition of tensions (from internal to external) and discouragement of independent thinking. Don't shift our own problems onto the others' conspiracy. We must first settle down our internal problems (commentary to Zhong Hua She Qu, Aug 17, 2009).

This critical position was more often identified in commentaries that were intended to refute those who defended China and perceived a threatening increase of global tension and pressures on China.

The defense of China and the attachment to the cultural core. Among the Chinese individuals living overseas who participated in these four forums there were slightly more views expressing attachment than expressing the distancing from the cultural core, although the proportion is almost even in regards to the debate on the tripartite system in China. Messages in defense of the Chinese cultural core asserted the rationality and realism of the current policies followed by the Chinese regime and the uniqueness of the Chinese political system that seems to be misunderstood or ignored by critics of China. Among defenders of China, attachment to the cultural core was expressed often as pride in China's national strength and the view that its achievements are equivalent or superior to those of its Western counterparts.

The COOCs who enacted attachment to the core refuted the claim that China is a dictatorship and emphasized that Chinese democracy is a different kind of democracy. For them, the description of China as a dictatorship is an unfounded accusation, and the calls for democracy are a cheap, handy pretext employed by the West to contain China. The following quotation is an example of the refuting argument:

No need to sanctify Tripartite System for separating powers. Like Mao Zedong once said: "Everything has two sides." The tripartite System has some advantages, but also can have a notoriously low efficiency. Besides, today's China is not in Mao's-like dictatorship. The CCP has some internal mechanisms for separating and balancing power and encouraging competition. The current Chinese political leaders who are all winners out of this competing system are not shy of their Western counterparts in terms of intelligence and integrity. They call the Chinese system "democratic centralism," "internal democracy," which is a kind of "elitist democracy" per se (commentary to Xing Dao Huan Qiu Wang, July, 2010).

The same commentator stressed the 30 years of accomplishments made by the current Chinese government to prove the superiority of the Chinese political system and diminish immediate external threats.

Along this line, other commentators focused on attacking Chinese dissidents, as in this comment: "Back up ten thousand steps, even if China adopted the Tripartite System, those dissidents of *Du Yun Lun* (Separatists, Democrats, and Fa Lun Gong) would not have good fruits to eat" (commentary to Xing Dao Huan Qiu Wang, July, 2010). Another commentator expressed his or her reaction with reference to the hypocrisy of Western powers that denounce human rights violations in China now but are unlikely to continue doing so once China reforms the system to accommodate

Western interests: “Once the Tripartite System is established, all the wheels (Fa Lun Gong practitioners) should be the first eradicated but then the West would have nothing to say” (commentary to Xing Dao Huan Qiu Wang, July, 2010).

Some of the comments defending the cultural core begin with criticism of China’s current status quo but eventually display a deep concern for stability and desire to maintain the establishment. For instance, this commentator who denies the practicability of the tripartite system in China starts his or her argumentation by criticizing inequality in China but ends up favoring the maintenance of the current regime:

Up to nowadays, the head of a state-run company can earn compensation hundreds times of a regular employee! The CCP has died with only a hollow shell! Beijing University sets up senior executive programs to train American high officials. In Wall Street, Keynes’ capitalism does not work! Today’s world is calling for a brand new mode. So young fellows, please get to understand “Marxism and Leninism” and “Keynes” and investigate the realities of workers and farmers before working on creating the brand new theory!! However, in a China with 1.3 billion people, the “Tripartite System” must lead China to the dead end (commentary to Xing Dao Huan Qiu Wang, July, 2010).

Although not all commentaries make reference to tensions in the global environment, as in the example above, in many cases the perceptions of increasing or diminishing external pressures on China and their effects was an integral part of the ideological argument. For example, one commentator, who enacted the position of defending the current policies of the Chinese government and perceived increasing tensions in the international sphere, stated his position in this manner:

A child less than one year old can fall and get hurt while running ... according to this [common sense], people downstairs [meaning one or more particular

previous commentators in the forum whose comments appeared below the newer entries] conclude that what I mean to say is that we need to walk the rest of our life, and infer that my opinion is that running is a bad sport? What a ridiculous logic! As a matter-of-fact, in many Asian, African, and Latin countries, democracy didn't bring a wealthy and stable life to their people. Successful democratic regimes have some basic characteristics: 1) they first strengthen the nation and then promote democracy as Britain, U.S., Japan, and most European nations did before building sophisticated democracies upon relatively wealthy and stable internal environments; 2) they then select their own path: every nation designs and perfects democracy according to its peculiar situation (commentary to Zhong Hua She Qu, Aug 17, 2009).

Then, the same commentator began to refer and denounce the international environment that applied external pressures on China:

In today's China, the first characteristic has been achieved and democratic reform can start right now. But the external environment does not lead to optimism. We have to be cautious, moving slowly with small steps. Chinese democracy needs a slower pace. Neglect the U.S. bullshit and never copy the mode of other countries, because China is China. No other nation in the world has ever traveled in the path of China (commentary to Zhong Hua She Qu, Aug 17, 2009).

Thus, for this commentator the increasing external pressures on China to follow a Western model of democracy and the growing influence of Western ideas are the primary factors that slow down the pace of China's political reform.

However, among those who enacted cultural attachment the most common perception was one that diminished the threat that external pressures and international tensions would cause negative effects on China. These COOCs maintained a positive cultural identification through their assessment of China's national strength as equivalent or superior to their Western counterparts. In the identification process of these COOCs, a sense of cultural pride outruns cultural shame, leading to

manifestations of cultural superiority, nationalism, chauvinism, or ethnocentrism. For

example:

It's too late to stop the transition of global power (from the West) to China ... There have been an ill financial system in the U.S. for a long time, plus Clinton's government made a big mistake for it couldn't eliminate a potential war against terrorism that allowed China a chance to develop. Now the U.S. is going down inevitably. If the U.S. dares to launch a nuclear war against China, Washington D.C., New York City, Chicago ... will disappear although China may lose more. No one could win (commentary to Zhong Hua She Qu, Aug 17, 2009).

Another example of this position:

Although the U.S. is the sole super power in the world, it's going down like a sunset. The U.S. is afraid of the fact that its position as global overlord is being replaced by China and so is constantly making trouble with China. While China has a lot of problems, China is winning people's hearts in terms of both internal and external policies. China's development annoys the U.S. that feels helpless. Even the threat of war would not work because China is a nuclear power. The day when the U.S. declares war against China will be the day when it becomes the second U.K. (commentary to Dong Fang Wang, Nov 9, 2009).

The position above is framed in a manner that underplays the rivalry and appeals to Chinese cultural pride.

In sum, in the majority of instances COOCs' comments construct ideological positions based on a sense of detachment from or attachment to their membership in Chinese culture and influenced by a particular perception of how the global context influences China. In the process of identification, one can observe how dimensions of cultural identity like sociality, individuality, and materiality become salient in shaping positional identification. For example, the social dimension, or sociality, operates in the awareness of the broader international context as well as the social norms and dialectical engagement between self and society. Besides sociality, individuality is

another dimension of identity that influences positionalities in ideological debates.

For instance, one commentator stressed his or her critical position with the frame of

individuality – individual interests and benefits: “Who cares what China needs?

Dictatorship?! Fine! Thank God, I am not part of it” (commentary to Zong He Xin

Wen, May 26, 2010). Another commentator also manifested his detachment from an

individualist perspective:

The CCP has determined to stick to this road toward a dead end until falling into the dismal abyss. Fortunately I, my wife, and children have been out of there [China]. Our lives are not much better, but the good thing is that we don't have to sacrifice ourselves together with them [the people under the CCP regime] (commentary to Xing Dao Huan Qiu Wang, July, 2010).

In addition to sociality and individuality, materiality—or the emphasis on material conditions and resources—is another dimension of identity influencing identification.

For example, one commentator identified as *Pu Tou* (or Sheriff) stated his defense of

China by stressing how building a solid economy was a pre-requisite before the

superstructure of democracy could be built:

Who are dreaming to see a chaotic China? I just feel that poor countries adopting democracy can spoil the true meaning of democracy because, without certain economic development, the people might still be starving. And then how could they have the high-level of intelligence and morality [required for the implementation of democracy]. In poor nations, democracy might mean corruption and separation. We only want the democracy of wealthy nations, not that of poor nations . . . China was once very poor and now just starts to accumulate some resources. Following the same path, China is very promising in terms of a smooth transit into a real democratic society. For this I highly appreciate Deng Xiaoping's great vision and foresight (commentary to Zong He Xin Wen, May 26, 2010).

Another commentator who wrote about establishing the material or economic base as

a pre-condition for “real” democracy stated:

Democracy in poor countries can only be counterproductive. The general strategy of Deng Xiaoping is positive – Democracy can be extra good only for a nation with extra resources . . . Only if the state gets rich, could its citizens live a better life without need for struggling, fighting, competing, and hurting each other (commentary to Zong He Xin Wen, May 26, 2010).

In this sense, the manifestation of an ideological position – based on varying degrees of attachment or distance from the cultural core—involves the intersection of various identity properties like sociality, individuality, materiality, and spirituality.

Responding to Outgroup Ideological Criticism against China

This section focuses on the analysis of COOCs comments responding to ideological criticisms toward China from non-Chinese sources to explore how this interpretive dynamic generated forms of identification. The forums selected for examining how COOCs responded to criticism include reactions to three posted news items featuring criticism of China from identified outgroup critics. The topics addressed by critics were the environment, the Beijing Olympics, and economic development. In the first forum, COOCs reacted to a news report that re-stated CNN commentator Jack Cafferty's derogatory comment on China and the declarations in California of Chris Daly, a former member of the city of San Francisco's board of supervisors (Zhong Xin She, April 13, 2008). On 2008 April 9 CNN "Situation Room," Cafferty made the following remarks: "So I think our relationship with China has certainly changed ... I think they're basically the same bunch of goons and thugs they've been for the last 50 years." Chris Daly, on his part, launched an unfounded accusation during the Beijing Olympic Torch Relay in 2008 that the Chinese government was funding pro-China demonstrators outside China. The second report

refers to the criticism of foreign media led by CNN in regards to China's environmental problems at the time of the Copenhagen Climate Summit in 2009 (Tian Ya, Dec 9, 2009). In this one, critics put the spotlight on the infamous case of Linfen, a polluted mid-city in Shanxi province. The third report is about some U.S. American scholars who commented on China's economic development (Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010). This report emphasized the critics' view that China's current development and national strength were inferior to the U.S.: "Compared to the U.S., China is still in Kindergarten."

In the selected forums featuring responses to outgroup criticism, the commentaries of COOCs were predominantly—in terms of number—concerned with defending China and counter-attacking outgroup critics. Similar to the responses to ideological exposition, COOCs' responses to outgroup criticism can be generally placed in two broad categories related to the commentators' sense of membership in Chinese culture: attachment to China that in this case is expressed as resistance to criticism or the distancing from the Chinese core expressed in this case as agreement with outgroup critics. In resisting criticism, COOCs articulated a relatively unified and stable rhetorical strategy: to question the motive of the critics even when they acknowledged the factuality in the criticisms. Among those who agreed with outgroup critics, there was a wider range of rhetorical strategies used to articulate their positions, from viewing criticism as bitter "medicine" to raise awareness of what is wrong, to making distinctions between the political regime and Chinese average

people and the motherland, to underscoring China's shortcomings when compared with Western political, economic, and spiritual developments, to the search for a middle ground when negotiating opposing arguments.

To some degree, outgroup criticism also becomes a catalyst for commentators, as the initial critique from an outgroup source becomes irrelevant when the debate among COOCs takes its own shape and direction in the form of internal debates among rival commentators.

Resistance to outgroup criticism and attachment to the cultural core. The response of COOCs who defended China used some familiar rhetorical strategies: questioning the motive of the outgroup critics and of those obliging COOCs seen as ideological rivals. Even when faced with legitimate accusations or factual information, this group of commentators seemed to have the need to keep vigilant of hidden motives in any criticism. These commentators generally assumed a position of identification that privileged a Chinese group identity marked by nationalism, loyalty to the motherland, and the dichotomy between "us" Chinese under the threat of "them," the political enemies of China. Through this ideological positioning, COOCs provided their interpretations of national and global issues, including the tensions between natural environment and economic development.

For instance, in addressing Jack Cafferty and Chris Daly's accusations, commentators pointed out their perception of the critics' real agenda. One said:

From CNN performers such as Lou Dobbs and Jack Cafferty, who are mouthful of "communist China," anyone with a brain can see what their

ulterior motives are. Check out the recent US Air Force recruitment ads, is that misleading or what? What could we expect? After all, what can really back us up is our own motherland (commentary to Zhong Xin She, April 13, 2008).

Another commentator in this forum tried to discredit outgroup critics by questioning the larger cultural context, particularly racial and ethnic prejudice in U.S. society:

Beneath the veil of warmth and kindness, there is the prevalent racial discrimination. Americans are heirs of former Puritans and deserters, who were once discriminated in their ancestral lands. In this land rich in the tradition of discrimination, severe racial discrimination will always exist, only that is more hypocritically covered under a veil (commentary to Zhong Xin She, April 13, 2008).

And one commentator directed the counter-criticism to another commentator in the same forum who had previously blamed the CCP for ruining China's international image:

Don't say how bad the CCP might be. It gains favorable public opinion by winning and hosting Olympics. How about you? You're worse for advancing your political agenda by defaming the whole Chinese nation! It's not easy to host Olympics, which can make all Chinese feel proud and elated. You want the whole world to see us as jokes. Then how good could you be? (commentary to Zhong Xin She, April 13, 2008).

As illustrated here, counter-criticisms are often directed toward questioning the political motive and character attributes of the critics, including those of ingroup commentators who shared the same view of outgroup critics.

In the forum about foreign media's reports on China's environmental problems before the Copenhagen Summit, one commentator self-identified as *thinkaboutsomething* offered an argument on the relationship between factual statements and communication motives:

Anyone with a brain would know that even if CNN's report is real, at this sensitive moment, its purpose is absolutely not for the benefit of Chinese

people but for the benefit of American people (commentary to Tian Ya, Dec 9, 2009).

In order to further ratify this point, *thinkaboutsomething* used an analogy:

This is like two people that are going to be on a live TV program. A sees B's pants unzipped but does not tell B until the broadcasting begins. Someone downstairs who said CNN was kindhearted might also think A is helping B rather than tricking B (commentary to Tian Ya, Dec 9, 2009).

Another commentator directly identified CNN's reporting activity as "ideological reporting" and explained: "Even a factual report cannot convince the Chinese, who must suspect its real intent."

Through this ideological frame, COOCs provided their interpretations of issues in the global context and, more specifically, of the tension between natural environment and economic development. COOCs who resisted outgroup criticism focused on discrediting the source of information and revealing the hypocrisy of outgroup critics rather than addressing to the criticism directed toward China. For instance, the following excerpts are from different commentators in the same forum:

The U.S. never wants to be responsible . . . Statistics show that the U.S. is the world's largest and longest polluter. Even those fawning Chinese cannot deny such fact-of-the-matter. In this Summit, the U.S. attempts to lead the old industrial European nations to evade their responsibility: first to put the blame onto the new industrial nations; second to employ this opportunity to add waste gas import duties to strangle the newly developed nations and continue their mode of dominating the world with new.

. . .

How the Earth becomes so fragile today is mainly because of the sins of the past 200 years of Western industrialization. In order to shift their responsibility, Westerners try all means to exaggerate the role that the third world industrial nations play in the production of global pollution.

. . .

This is a world of "first comes first serves." The developed countries had ruined the global resources before everybody realizes the environmental

problems and then clean up their own countries and shift the pollution to the poor developing countries (commentaries to Tian Ya, Dec 9, 2009).

Some of these commentators even provided statistical data to support their counter-criticism led by goal of protecting their cultural membership as Chinese.

In effect, as these quotations suggest the positions of COOCs who objected to outgroup criticism generally show greater levels of cultural attachment, expressed in notions of national pride, historical victimization by Western industrial powers, concern for the motherland, and a sense of group identity in which the Chinese “people” are imagined as a monolithic group under attack.

Agreement with outgroup critics and detachment from the cultural core.

In these forums, commentaries in agreement with outgroup critics are significant. Most of these commentators reinforced and expanded the criticism of outgroup critics, exerting their critical position and asserting a sense of cultural shame. Some commentators aggrandized the ammunition of critics to discredit the legitimacy of the Chinese government and uncover structural flaws in the current political regime. Some even blamed founders of traditional Chinese schools of philosophy, such as Confucius and Mencius, as the root of all evil in today’s China. Other commentators made a point in differentiating average Chinese people from the Communist regime when making statements about China. Some labeled the responses of rival pro-Chinese commentators as too “jittery and bigoted” because news reports were showing just plain facts, while others prescribed that the right strategy for interpreting outgroup criticism was to remove any ideological factors and listen only to the facts.

The diverse perspectives offered by this group of COOCs share some common positionings when it comes to the response to outgroup criticism and the construction of particular relations toward Chinese cultural membership: 1) the view of criticism as hard “facts” that can serve as a “medicine” or incentive to gain awareness of what is wrong and move beyond shame and towards change; 2) the rejection of the political regime and its ideology but identification with the Chinese average people and the motherland; 3) the assessment of China’s levels of economic growth, political development, military strength, and cultural and spiritual contributions in terms of inferiority or backwardness when compared to the West, and 4) the search for a middle ground when negotiating opposing arguments.

One set of comments that showed agreement with or support for outgroup critics, stressed the potential benefits of criticism as a “bitter medicine benign for health.” For instance, in the forum debating foreign media’s reporting on Linfen’s pollution before the Copenhagen Summit, commentators stressed the factual base of the outgroup criticism and suggested the potential benefits of such criticism: “If after CNN reporting, China’s pollution improves, then we will have to appreciate them [the critics];” “I can understand your indignation but pathetically could you really think that China’s pollution is not severe?;” “. . . we should support the CNN reporter who brought us with the real and general view that some Chinese reporters will never [bring],” and “China as a world factory has some industrial cities highly polluted,

which is a fact. No shame to admit it. Be brave to admit it, is the start of resolving the problem.”

In a second set of comments, the emphasis was on denouncing the regime but identifying with the people and the motherland. For example, in responding to Jack Cafferty’s “thugs and goons” comment, two commentators made a series of lengthy comments to reinforce outgroup criticism and expand the ideological critique of the CCP regime while separating the government from the people. Although Cafferty did not specifically distinguish Chinese people from the Chinese regime by saying the Chinese were “basically the same bunch of goons and thugs they’ve been for the last 50 years,” the commentators interpreted that his real intent was to refer to the Chinese government and not to the Chinese people—a point that was made after the comment on a CNN apology statement. A commentator under the name *Le He* or “Happiness and Peace” helped make the distinction between the Chinese people and the “Motherland” and the Chinese government in his commentary:

Communist China is not far away from the definition of a “thug”: externally, it is hostile to Western nations and, at the same time, it hopes to be on equal terms with them and earn their money; it befriends North Korea, Cuba, Iran, and Yugoslavia. Internally, it is only crueler; it was anti-government in the 40s and beat up the Nationalist army; it was anti-Right-wing in the 50s and beat up Chinese intellectuals; it was anti-Capitalist-roaders in the 60s and beat up every Chinese . . . anti-humanity and anti-democracy in the 80s and beat up Chinese students . . . beat up the Taiwanese, Tibetans, and Fa Lun Gong . . . The CCP officials are tireless in beating up everybody. That’s way they are really a bunch of “thugs.” We should not obscure the concepts of “Motherland” and the lout “THUG” Government. Nothing wrong with the “Motherland,” just a little over polluted. The lout “THUG” Government manipulates Chinese people (including Taiwanese and Tibetans) in external and internal policies to make the Olympics become the pageant for extreme nationalists of Han

supremacists. That is the key issue (commentary to Zhong Xin She, April 13, 2008).

Another commentator self-identified as *Fan Gong Xian Feng* or “Anti-Communism Pioneer” expanded the criticism by questioning the representativeness of the CCP and the identity of its supporters:

To the CCP and its running dogs: don't gild your faces. When has your representation of Chinese identity ever been approved by the people? Only less than 5%, how could you represent the Chinese? Anyone is qualified to be against the CCP because you've snatched their resources . . . Ordinary people have the right to depose the CCP (commentary to Zhong Xin She, April 13, 2008).

The distinction between the Chinese “ordinary people” and their identity and the Chinese political regime is crucial among this set of critical commentators for the articulation of their ideological positions. Identifying with “ordinary people,” these agreeing commentators set up their critical rationality against the dominating Chinese ideology on the basis of their individuality. This illustrates further the interrelationships between different identity properties in identification.

A third type of response was articulated by COOCs who did not make a distinction between the government and the people, opted to establish their ideological position by offering assessments of China's levels of economic growth, political development, military strength, and cultural and spiritual contributions. They expressed a sense of cultural shame by asserting the inferiority or backwardness of China when compared to the West and by critiquing the foundations of Chinese humanities and philosophy as inherent hindrance preventing China from regime change and from becoming a global power that can match the Western alliance.

For example, in the forum about the US experts on China who said China is still in “kindergarten” when compared to the United States, many obliging COOCs not only embraced the idea but also endued such statement with richer connotations. One commentator reverberated with the criticism: “China itself knows its GDP per person cannot even be on the world’s top 100 . . . Kindergarten is a very realistic assessment!” Others extended the criticism to China’s social ethos: “In terms of democracy and human rights, China probably hasn’t yet entered preschool . . .” and “. . . such a great country has such small mind, sigh, sadly.” One commentator expressed his or her position from the perspective of increasing external pressures on China:

The US national defense and military power is the greatest in the world. U.S. is the only nation that has the capacity to finish a nationwide rally in a war situation within 24 hours . . . China’s military power is no contest compared to the U.S., not to speak of other deformities such as air pollution, population quality, and corruption (commentary to Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010).

When another COOC stated: “Honestly, China cannot become world super power . . . In the past, we had Confucius and Mencius, but what do we have now (commentary to Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010)?” A different COOC even denied the contributions of Confucius and Mencius because they “did not bring wealth and power to China . . . They just offered a basic philosophy about how people should live under the king and elders, how the king should rule peoples (commentary to Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010).”

The debate on the significance and uses of Confucius and Mencius' philosophies as China's cultural foundation induced another commentator to utter a self-deprecating statement that enacted cultural shame:

Where's the power? What a shame?! The eternal Confucius and Mencius have been the root of all evil. They fawn over power and despise the honesty of labor. The kind of culture that evolves under their teachings is that of the eunuch. Even the seemingly benign doctrines they preach are twisted in the current Chinese society. Without a spiritual revelation at the grass-root level, there won't even be the courage to be strong. Talking about ruling the world is so naïve at this stage. Think about it . . . (commentary to Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010).

These assessments of China's cultural conditions and contributions generated heated debate among commentators who resisted or obliged to the original critique raised by outgroup sources but now turned their attention to debating within the ingroup. For instance, one commentator elaborated on the spiritual dimension of identity as a weak aspect in Chinese culture, one that presents no alternative to other forms of spirituality in the West and Middle East:

Talking about a Chinese domination, one has to answer the question – what would the Chinese provide to replace the spiritual foundation of the Western culture . . . Only if some idea could come out of China that receives universal acceptance as superior to Christianity, Muslim, and Judaism so that Westerners would like to convert to live a Chinese life . . . The Chinese elite (not the people) struggles to survive and strive to master, engaging in a life of wealth-chasing and devoid of any spiritual ideal. What can one expect out of this—ruling the world? What a crazy idea (commentary to Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010)?

Along these lines, a commentator identified as *jinghuaren* or “Chinese in Beijing” reiterated that the rise of a great nation necessitated an advanced philosophic and humanistic system and then said contemporary China lacked such systems of faith (commentary to Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010). Another COOC reinforced

jinghuaren's doubts with a sarcastic note: "Does China have humanities? Yeah, which is to live like pigs and believe in money can buy everything (commentary to Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010)." This type of statement provoked the quick responses of COOCs who resisted the criticism against China and offer rebuts like the one posted by a commentator identified as *Supernova1*:

China's rise relies exactly on a strong humanistic thinking system. For example, based on the tradition of Confucius and Mencius, we developed some rather innovative and pragmatic thoughts: "Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth," "crossing the river by feeling the stones (taking one step at a time)," and "Bu Zheteng" or "No self-inflicted setbacks," which are in the guidance of the principle of absorbing the quintessence and discarding the dross of the Western culture (commentary to Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010).

The debate peaked with several lengthy commentaries on the spiritual values of Chinese traditional cultures and Western religions offered by two primary debaters or opinion leaders from both sides: *Supernova13* and *6grizzly*. For *6grizzly*, Western religious culture provides tools for harnessing the insatiable desires of human beings and constitutes a foundation for social stability and economic growth. On the other hand, *Supernova13* argued that Chinese culture is superior to Western religions, which are "ridiculous" and "causing a lot of problems in today's world and may eventually result in the demise of human civilization (commentary to Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010)."

Likewise, the dynamics of the debate generated by the foreign media expose of China's environmental problems suggest how outgroup criticism turns into a contentious internal debate where COOCs use different types of responses and assume different degrees of identification with Chinese cultural membership. For

example, a commentator identified as *petergodson* saw outgroup criticism as an opportunity for the Chinese to be more aware of their own real problems and therefore more hopeful for “locating the crux and solving the problems (commentary to Tian Ya, Dec 9, 2009).” And for this commentator, the crux of China’s problems was the “irresponsible government and the gullible Chinese people.” Then, drawing on his or her experience living abroad, the commentator compared conditions in China and in cities abroad to indict the Chinese government’s policies:

We have to face the reality . . . We can strongly object the US-led Western countries’ deliberate defamation. However, at the same time, we should even more strongly protest our own government, which is so irresponsible to environmental pollution. Any Chinese who live or have ever lived abroad would be impressed by the fresh air quality and governmental policies for environmental protection in these countries. We sacrifice the people’ living environment for economic development. It is a shame that few people dare to protest against the Government’s misconduct due to our nationalism. When we cry out for justice, we shouldn’t shield off our own shortcomings . . . All responsible and conscientious Chinese, let’s protect our justice with the weapon of justice, but meanwhile don’t forget to defend our right of survival . . . for our later generations (commentary to Tian Ya, Dec 9, 2009).

This type of statement would provoke reactions of rival commentators like *thinkaboutsomething*, who described critics of China as “Chinese living abroad who strive to get rich by selling China’s flesh (commentary to Zhong Xin She, April 13, 2008).” In turn, another commentator using the identification *mxu12* replied by positing that the Chinese should overcome their inferiority complex in order to be more tenacious:

Unless you are a person with inferiority complex, you don’t first question a person’s motive every time he writes or says something about China . . . About who are the victims of Chinese pollution . . . exactly those guys rather die twenty years earlier, breathing filthy air, than be criticized by some

foreigners who cause no real harm . . . Your fellow Chinese breathe filthy air on a daily basis, and you feel good denying it and calling other people traitors, people like you are indeed traitors of the Chinese people (commentary to Zhong Xin She, April 13, 2008).

Thinkaboutsomething, reproducing the pattern described in the previous section of this chapter, would counteract the critique by questioning the commentators' true motive and cultural identity:

You don't have to list China's environmental problems like you're attached to an American spy satellite circling the orbit all the time. The thing is – Suppose the environment can bring people a 10 dollar profit, America wants to take 5 dollars and only give China 50 cents. While you hope China should only take 30 cents and give America 5 dollars and 20 cents. Say you're not a national traitor, who would believe it (commentary to Zhong Xin She, April 13, 2008)?

In the ensuing exchange, *mxu12* and other commentators engaged

thinkaboutsomething with cursing and name-calling. Then, *thinkaboutsomething*

continued to rebuke until the debate died out with his or her last comment, as follows:

How come some Chinese who grew up in China forget about their own mother [motherland] so quickly after they got abroad! What I said is reasonable . . . for some downstairs, it doesn't matter if you're Chinese or not, the most important thing is whether you still treat yourselves as Chinese. See, Mr. *Siwuwei* [one of the commentators in this forum] has distinguished himself out of the Chinese group. I feel *Siwuwei* must be able to watch CNN and get access to Internet and look Chinese but refuse to think of himself as "Chinese netizen." That is interesting (commentary to Zhong Xin She, April 13, 2008).

Engaged in such verbal brawls, commentators showcased the tensions at the root of their positional cultural identification. However, it is not uncommon to find among COOCs who accept outgroup criticism and take a position of distance from the cultural core the use of pronouns like "we" and "our" to refer to Chinese people and culture to signal a degree of cultural ascription. Yet, among rivals in cyberspace,

these virtual characters were on bad terms with one another as if they were archenemies. The scene can become quite nasty and the conflict highly emotional.

A fourth group of responses showed an emphasis on trying to balance opposing views. These commentators strived to neutralize internal tensions and attempted to transcend specific ideological positions with a sense of detachment. They did so by separating the questionable motives of outgroup critics and the reality in outgroup criticism. On one hand, these commentators resisted outgroup criticism as deliberate “defamation,” showing a stronger attachment to the Chinese cultural core. On the other hand, they stressed the significance of acknowledging the factuality of the problems revealed by outgroup critics. In this sense, these commentaries are both resisting critique and obliging to it. For instance, in the debate on China’s environment, one COOC mentioned: “I’ve been in LinFen, which was far from having a vastly clear and blue sky. CNN’s defamation is an issue, but LinFen’s pollution is way too severe.” Another wrote: “. . . we don’t care what CNN talked about, just let them bullshit whatever they want; but we have to take care of our own health (commentary to Tian Ya, Dec 9, 2009).”

Responding to the criticism of US experts on China, one commentator who defended China accepted the criticism in this way: “This could be good for cooling down the popular theory of China threat in the West.” Another one accepted the criticism but reasserted his defense of China while emphasizing the significance of truthful and realistic assessment of China’s development:

I sincerely hope that our motherland becomes stronger, but we have to face the reality. Although China has been developing fast, according to economic principles, lowering the growth rate is mandatory. More importantly our political reform is over slow-paced hindering the economy from further development. So we have to admit that we are still so far away from being the number one. My fellow Chinese, we have to be self-motivated and work harder (commentary to Zhong Qing Wang, Jan 23, 2010).

More so than in other COOCs, these commentators negotiated internal divisions in a way that asserted their sense of cultural attachment by selecting the reasonable arguments of outgroup critics and diverting the negative points of other ingroup commentators to transform the negative critique into positive affirmation. Such positional cultural identification can be seen as very strategic and consistent with need of Chinese overseas to culturally survive outside China. These commentators might represent a subgroup of opinion leaders within the Chinese community that can help with communication between China and the rest of the world.

In closing, COOCs who agreed with outgroup critics showed a more fragmented and heterogeneous range of positionings and degrees of attachment to cultural membership than COOCs who resisted criticism. While some accepted criticism while showing concern for and identification with the “motherland” and its people, others expressed a sense of detachment based on a view that conflated government, people, and culture and placed them in a position of inferiority or backwardness in relation to the West.

Responding to Ingroup Ideological Criticism

Ingroup ideological criticism refers to the scrutiny and evaluation of China and Chinese culture posed by Chinese sources. Drawn from basically deductive and

quantitative experimental research schemata, intergroup sensitivity effect suggests that people tend to be harsher and more defensive in responding to outgroup critics than ingroup critics. However, the current research shows seemingly an opposite pattern with more insights on some qualitative differences in COOCs' responses to outgroup and ingroup criticisms. Generally, the textual analysis indicates that COOCs think outgroup cultural criticisms are more understandable than ingroup cultural criticisms due to different group stances. Hence COOCs provided more profound interpretations for the causes and motives of ingroup cultural criticisms, which are qualitatively different from their understandings of outgroup cultural criticisms. Specifically, such qualitative differences drawn from the analyzed textual data lie in the more elaborate interpretations about the causes and motives of the criticisms in terms of the ingroup critics' individualities often perceived as more distinctive than outgroup critics. Those who agree with the ingroup criticisms put themselves more aligned with the ingroup critics than outgroup critics as similarly elite individuals distinguished from the general Chinese mass. Those who oppose ingroup criticism exhibited their harsh critical attitude against the ingroup critics' peculiar individuality, accusing them of xenocentrism. Such critical attitude differs from COOCs' defensive attitude when dealing with outgroup critics out of their group agenda. The opposing COOCs also used different labels for ingroup critics such as calling them dissident or separatist "Du," "Yun," and "Lun," who are regarded deviating ingroup individuals alienated by the Western influences. Therewith

individual alignment and harsh personal attack features COOCs' responses to ingroup cultural criticisms.

The analysis of the diverging ideological positions enacted in reaction to ingroup criticism of China is based on the reading of responses to four forums. The first forum centered on a blog article posted only a couple of days before the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, warning the Chinese that they should not take too much pride from the success of this event (Wo De Zhong Guo, Aug 18, 2008). In this article, titled "An Alternative Voice: Do not get over-elated with Beijing Olympics," the ingroup critic reached out to the Chinese audience to try to make them coolheaded and persuade them to resist the hyper national sentiment generated for the event. The second forum was stimulated by a report regarding a Voice of Germany's interview with the man who alleged to be the designer of the prototype of the Beijing Olympics' main stadium known as the Bird Nest (De Guo Zhi Sheng, Aug 13, 2008). In this radio interview, Ai Weiwei—a renowned avant-garde visual artist and son of a famous Chinese contemporary poet—blatantly accused Zhang Yimou—the director of Beijing Olympics' opening ceremony—of being socially irresponsible and morally soulless. The third forum is formed by responses to another blog article titled "My dear motherland: Please stop your degeneration (Wo De Zhong Guo, Mar 18, 2010)." In this blog, an anonymous author labored a lengthy critique of the contemporary social ethos in China with a rather hopeless and pessimistic tone. The fourth forum is composed of commentaries on a CNN's television interview with a famous,

outspoken, and young social critic and literary writer, Han Han, who managed to publish despite government censorship (Zong He Xin Wen, June 2, 2010). During the interview, Han criticized the Chinese government for suppressing freedom of speech and advocated a free environment for artists in China. All four articles contain negative evaluations of China in their central arguments.

As with the responses to outgroup critics, when commentators focused their attention on criticism against China or aspects of Chinese culture raised by ingroup members, three types of reactions were salient: COOCs who sided with ingroup critics and exhibited a distancing from Chinese culture and a sense of cultural shame, COOCs who opposed the criticism to defend a group stance to enact distinctive cultural affiliation; and a few commentators who offered mixed responses such as acknowledging the legitimacy of the criticism and yet questioning the motive of the critics in the same commentaries. However, each subgroup shows further differentiation in terms of the nuances of their positions.

Agreeing with ingroup critics: detaching self from Chinese group identity.

Among COOCs who agreed with ingroup criticism directed toward the Chinese government and culture, the comments feature a common pattern: a distinction between self and group in which commentators create a distance between them and the Chinese reality and thus enact a sense of identification. Yet, this position is articulated in different ways, as COOCs stressed different dimensions of their identities when taking positions. Two most salient ones intersecting in their

ideological positioning were the individual and the social dimensions. Hence one group of COOCs established the distinction between self and group by stressing their personal qualities and those of likeminded ingroup critics as superior to the negative attributes ascribed to the Chinese government and people in China. A second group of commentators established a distance by stressing social dimensions of the Chinese reality while minimizing or omitting references to their individualities. Yet, both groups tended to share a critical view of the Chinese government, culture or people and to locate themselves as superior to an undifferentiated Chinese nation or ingroup mass. It is important to note, however, that an emphasis on individuality or sociality does not eliminate the enactment of other identity dimensions in the articulation of views. As the examples below will illustrate, the comments also show how ideological and material dimensions intersect with individual and social dimensions in the process of positional identification.

The commentators that stressed an individualist stance tended to separate their positive personal traits such as social responsibility, artistic sensibility, critical thinking skills, and etc. from perceived negative group attributes like passivity, complicity, stubbornness, frivolity, insensitivity, moral degeneration, mass behavior, ignorance, and etc. that seem to cause a sense of cultural shame. Often, a sense of self-righteousness was inspired by and projected onto ingroup critics of China. For instance, one commentator who expressed agreement with a critic who wrote that China was degenerating reiterated:

Like Lu Xun [arguably the most famous and influential liberal and progressive Chinese writer and social critic from early 20th century], I also feel sorry for the misery of our fellow Chinese and at the same time angry at their inability to contend. You and I are similarly socially responsible but both incapable to change the situation. I appreciate your sincere words for they contain the messages that I myself want to say (commentary to *Wo De Zhong Guo*, Mar 18, 2010).

This commentator identified with the ingroup critic to take a position that distinguishes him or herself and the critic from a Chinese mass that lacks the ability to fight the system. Some other commentators included rival COOCs as part of the Chinese collectivity from which they wished to distance themselves. One COOC referred to the Chinese who are physically outside China but support the Chinese government as “stubborn with their granite heads” as the Chinese living in China, and as despicable as the “Chinese men’s soccer team.” Another COOC, who argued that individual and independent thinking was a crucial principle for the survival of the Chinese nation, did so by distancing himself or herself from the Chinese “crowd”:

I am amazed there are so many people here that do not understand and respect art at all, and also do not have an individual mind, not even talking about having a soul! I feel truly sad . . . When the emperor is wearing his “new clothes,” do not be the crowd, try to be the kid! If more Chinese could think like that, then this country will have more hope (commentary to *De Guo Zhi Sheng*, Aug 13, 2008).

In this type of responses, the commentators’ positions were enacted primarily through the lens of individuality. But in other cases, COOCs who agreed with ingroup critics of China stressed a dimension of their identity: their connection to the social reality of China. The perception that today’s social reality in China is disenchanting is an important perspective through which commentators enacted a sense of individuality through the scope of sociality. In their comments, references to

China's deteriorating social structure and degenerating political ethos provided a departing point for the enactment of their ideological positions. Through social critique, commentators constructed a perception of self in which they positioned themselves as critical ingroup members with relatively pessimistic views of China's socioeconomic conditions and political leadership. For example, they refer to the current economic prosperity in China as "fleeting excitation on a deathbed" and would argue that the "broken boat of Chinese government" will not "float" long. "Look at China's reality," one entreated: "ordinary Chinese don't have place to live in . . . few can afford cars, high commodity prices, high prices for gasoline (commentary to *Wo De Zhong Guo*, Mar 18, 2010)." Another seemed to even put a curse on the nation: "China, a terminal patient with both AIDS and cancer, should die earlier to get reborn earlier (commentary to *Wo De Zhong Guo*, Mar 18, 2010)."

When agreeing with an ingroup critic's view that China was facing a national crisis, one commentator identified as *Yuguo79* expressed the same depressing view of China's social reality:

A real patriotic article well-written . . . Hope the CCP could reach some consensus with a greater sense of urgency! China is now entrapped in a dilemma: to develop, China needs to get away from Mao's "close-door" policy and connect to other countries. While upon the international connection, the economy has developed to become 70% reliant on foreign trade. Officials corrupted, citizens frivolous. "Foreign flies" now are replaced by domestic insects! "One step at a time" and "feel the rocks to cross the river" – but what about if the river were too deep to reach the rocks and people could be wiped out (commentary to *Wo De Zhong Guo*, Mar 18, 2010).

In the same forum, another commentator offered a similar analysis:

I couldn't agree more. Great article that says what I want to say. China has really come to the brink of a dooming abyss. Internal turmoil and foreign threats can be worse than the late Qin dynasty. And people are the same, numb and immoral. Upper class aristocrats oppress crazily! Perhaps this is also their last craziness. Pathetically, all Chinese people will become their grave sacrifices. Is it worth it (commentary to Wo De Zhong Guo, Mar 18, 2010)?

And yet another offered this view of the Chinese supreme leaders in their enactment of a position of identification as a critical observer:

. . . these leaders in an autocratic or authoritarian regime never went through popular election or revolution for their high positions, which have been bestowed by the totalitarian mechanism. They do not have to be concerned about public image. How could and would they salute their people with full attention like those Western and Taiwanese leaders who would bow deep to their people . . . not to say to the two groups of Chinese (Taiwan and Hong Kong) in the free world... (commentary to Wo De Zhong Guo, Mar 18, 2010).

In sum, one may argue that both the commentators who stress China's social reality and those who stress their individuality when asserting their positional identification situate themselves at a distance from the Chinese cultural core. Both positions involve negative associations and attributions toward China's regime and peoples and show an absence of references to notions like motherland or even use of collective pronouns like "we" and "our." In this case, the dichotomy between the responses anchored on a sense of individualist and social-structural analysis does not lend itself to different ideological positions. Furthermore, we see how these two dimensions, individuality and sociality, crisscross concerns over material and spiritual dimensions to build positional cultural identification. More specifically, it seems to suggest that from individuality one sees more of materiality while through sociality one feels more of spirituality.

Opposing ingroup criticism of China. The reactions of commentators who opposed the criticism posed by ingroup critics showed three main themes, often intermingled in the discourse: the attack on the personal character of critics, a questioning of the critics' identity as Chinese, accusation of xenocentrism, and the affirmation nationalism and positive Chinese identity. In all cases, in the process of positioning themselves in opposition to critics, these commentators enacted a heightened sense of cultural attachment to China and positive identification as members of the Chinese culture.

Among COOCs who rejected ingroup criticism of China, there is a perception that critics who attack China are jealous of the Chinese current achievements because they are not a part of them; that critics are incapable of taking pride in China's progress as a nation because of their self-righteousness and ego-centrism; and that critics are individuals who are alienated by the influence of the West. One commentator who reacted to the article admonishing the Chinese not to be too proud of the Beijing Olympics stated her or his position in a scoffing mimicry of the critic's voice (*italic words are used to stress sarcastic intonation*):

Regardless of whether it is good or not, if I'm not part of it, I would badmouth it unflinchingly! . . . The Olympics can help the Chinese people get rid of the negative mentality resulting from so many years of being bullied and oppressed, including the fear and glorification of Western culture. After reading this article, I smell something sour: I'm smart, intelligent, and important . . . why I am still being excluded from the "elite" group in Beijing, only able to survive in the remote and occlusive countryside of a foreign nation and to get some attention by ventilating my cynical rants upon the opportunity when tens of thousands of people are watching the Olympics. Sigh (commentary to (Wo De Zhong Guo, Aug 11, 2008)!

In comments like this one, ingroup critics are portrayed as self-centric and westernized, as individuals who live outside China and will not partake in China's proud historical moment because they are not included in national life. Others see ingroup critics as "self-indulged" and "narcissistic," as "anomalies" linked to Chinese culture on a physiological or genetic basis only. As one commentator stated:

I am amazed by LZ [Lou Zhu or 楼主, meaning owner of the house referring to the author of the fourth article in this section, around which the forum was formed], who can be tearfully nitpicking. With a mix of rationality, sensitivity, discontent, and self-righteousness in him, LZ is indeed a psychopath and an anomaly [as a Chinese] (commentary to *Wo De Zhong Guo*, Mar 18, 2010)."

Thus, a common rhetorical strategy used to assert an ideological position is to discredit a rival critic by ascribing to his or her personality flaws.

Another strategy is to question the ingroup critics' motive and identity as Chinese. Commentators who rejected ingroup cultural criticism characterized critics as dissidents and separatists and used labels like "Du" (independence), "Yun" (democracy), and "Lun" (Fa Lun Gong) to refer to them. Critics are seen as individuals who have won sympathetic support from the West and therewith would like to say something against China that the West would like to hear. Their loyalty to the nation and Chinese identity are, in the last instance, put into question. The motives of ingroup cultural criticism are incomprehensible for these COOCs. As one commentator stated: "According to my judgment, you are not Chinese at all for you cannot bear something good happened to China." Another wrote: "Don't be so mean, unless you're not Chinese." In another example, one indicated:

I don't believe that this was done by some who loves China. There are

complaints and malcontent for misguiding and instigating people. Apparently the author is heinous, with evil intent to harm the Chinese people's cultural esteem (commentary to *Wo De Zhong Guo*, Mar 18, 2010).

Often, messages end up ostracizing ingroup critics, as in these examples:

He [Ai Weiwei, an outspoken ingroup critic] is an enemy of us Chinese.
He [Ai Weiwei] is just like you [referring to one of the ingroup critics], another traitor who is relying on selling your old country to make a living. Tell me why would we care about what he and you have to say? (commentary to *Wo De Zhong Guo*, Aug 18, 2008).

Thus, in responding to ingroup cultural criticism COOCs mixed the denigration of the personality and identity of rivals with the affirmation of their own Chinese identity and cultural pride. In these cases, positive and even unconditional attachment is more important than critical reflection. For example:

To the writer [the ingroup critic]: **YOU ARE WRONG.** I respect your analysis and, indeed, some of the problems you pointed out are true. **BUT** you chose the wrong timing and you are too prejudiced! Yet let me say that for modest Chinese people, the most important combination is passion + pride, as Chinese people suffered a lot, sacrificed a lot in the past, and it is time for them to stand up and say, **"WE ARE THE BEST!"** Never feel ashamed to say that when you are succeeding, as this is your right to say so. National confidence is far **MORE** crucial than self-criticism for China. The problems you mentioned are in general everywhere in the world. Why do you have to particularly discourage Chinese people when they're feeling well and making progress? If you're Chinese, I strongly recommend you to be more positive about your people, your country. If you are not Chinese, **PLEASE**, show your respect to the great Chinese people and this great Nation (commentary to *Wo De Zhong Guo*, Aug 11, 2008)!

This commentator attempted to be assertive with his or her positive cultural identification and refused to tolerate the negativity embedded in ingroup criticism.

Another commentator further explained why ingroup cultural criticism against Olympics was improper in the "concurrent" time frame:

I'm not incapable of listening to different voices. I am just disgusted by the

author (not his or her position), who brought out a bowl of shit when others were trying to enjoy some delicious dishes and with some seemingly profound messages. When we eat, we can't think of the other end of the food passage, which is shit. Let's just enjoy the meal and look to the future, when we could have a greater variety of foods and maybe get to land on the Moon or Mars. You don't have to make us sick with some shit in every meal we eat (commentary to Wo De Zhong Guo, Aug 11, 2008).

Implicitly or explicitly, in the rejection of ingroup criticism COOCs appealed to notions of xenocentrism and nationalism. While ingroup critics are labeled xenocentrics motivated by materialism, those loyal to China present themselves in the light of a nationalistic spirituality. Such a position also implies a reflection on the COOCs' perception of fundamental cultural differences between China and the more developed Western world. For example, when one commentator joins the debate on Ai Weiwei's qualifications as an artist, the reference to xenocentrism and materialism is clear:

I'm thrilled to hear that Ai Weiwei's European artistic activities were sponsored by the Europeans. Downstairs "*Highly Asymmetric*" [the user name of another COOC who sympathized with ingroup critics] hopes to prove Ai Weiwei's accomplishment with the fact that he was once awarded European financial aid. This is something we should really pay attention to . . . It is quite natural and normal for him to say something that the West would like to hear as he is a beneficiary of such financial sponsorship (commentary to De Guo Zhi Sheng, Aug 13, 2008).

On the other hand, commentators could also react to critics by stressing their nationalist position in opposition to materialism and xenocentrism, as in this example:

The meaning of many human activities cannot be measured with money. This Olympics might be commercially successful or not. More important is the psychological impact it brings about, including those on foreigners and those on Chinese ourselves. [It can] help reestablish Chinese pride and scatter the mental shadows amassed over years of oppression, including the xenophobia and the resulting xenocentrism (commentary to Wo De Zhong Guo, Aug 11, 2008).

In sum, COOCs responded to ingroup ideological criticism by making sense of the critics' individuality, sociality, materiality, and spirituality and, simultaneously, manifesting their own cultural identification. In this sense, the internal ideological debate becomes a way in which self-other perceptions are constructed and lead to relatively stable ideological positions of cultural identification. For instance, in regards to individuality we find that at the same time when they COOCs accuse ingroup critics of being jealous and self-righteous, they reflect their own positions as proud members of the Chinese culture. And by questioning the ingroup critics' credibility and group membership, they stress their cultural attachment and pride. Through ascribing the ingroup critics a xenocentric mentality driven by materialistic self-interests they exhibit their nationalism as an unchallenged spiritual preference.

Chapter Summary and Conclusion

COOCs participating in heated political forums present the ideological heterogeneity within the cultural group they represent. However, their diverse responses to different topics of ideological debate show peculiar patterns that manifest how the Chinese in the diaspora enact their positional cultural identification and enact different levels of attachment or detachment from Chinese cultural membership. Overall, COOCs' cultural identification in ideological debates is manifested primarily through an ideological divide between pro-China and pro-Western perspectives. Of course, in almost all selected forums there were also commentators who attempted to reach a middle ground with objective or neutral comments, but close to none aimed

for the reconciliation of the two sides. In this sense, cultural attachment becomes ideology in the selected forums.

The analysis of the data showed that on both sides of the divide, the debate leads commentators to assume positions of attachment or detachment from Chinese cultural membership not in a set of binary oppositions but as a continuum with varying degrees. Theoretically, cultural attachment should be conceptually different from the patriotic ideology promoted by the current regime that always strives to align and juxtapose loyalty to the nation, loyalty to the party, and loyalty to the people. However, the implantation of CCP party line in the educational experience of COOCs might actually precondition the ideological clashes observed in the selected forums. Those who take a defensive position toward China are likely to emphasize the inseparability of nation, government, and people. Other COOCs with critical positions were more likely to stress the differentiation between one's attachment to Chinese culture and tradition and one's detachment from the regime and its Communist ideology. More specifically, attachment to the cultural core was expressed in these forums primarily as 1) the defense of the rationality and the justification of the decision making of Chinese political authorities and their economic system, 2) affirmation of the positive qualities of Chinese culture and people, and 3) the celebration of the historical, economic, or social achievements of China and its peoples. Manifestations of cultural attachment generally conveyed a sense of cultural pride and positive identification as a member of the Chinese nation

or culture. Detachment or distance from the cultural core was expressed in positions that 1) criticized the ideology and decision making of Chinese authorities and called for regime change, 2) focused on negative aspects of Chinese culture and the character of its peoples, and 3) denounced Chinese failures and abuses committed through time. Manifestations of a cultural detachment were more commonly linked to a sense of cultural shame and separation from the dynamics of Chinese politics and culture in the mainland. Across topics and forums, cultural attachment is conveyed in the construction of self as loyal to the Chinese motherland and people, and as proud of China's progress and achievements, while others are perceived as disloyal, opportunistic, or envious. Cultural detachment is conveyed in constructions of self as an independent and critical thinker knowledgeable of Western culture and systems while the others are conceived as dictatorial, conformist, vulnerable or backward. It is important to observe that attachment and detachment is always a continuum rather than an opposition of extreme ends. This is most evident among COOCs who are critical of China and may distance themselves from the Chinese political and even cultural landscape and yet use pronouns like "we" and "our" when writing about China; it is also seen among COOCs who are critical of China's policies and cultural climate but express their concern with the fate of the nation or its ecological balance.

Overall, attachment to cultural core leads to an affirmation of identity that is more unified and stable for it conflates the self with the collective, the land and the culture, and the government and the people. Distance from the core leads to the

affirmation of more complex, ambivalent, and fractured identity. Here, we found positions split along the lines of: rejecting the political regime but affirming attachment to notions of the Chinese “motherland” and “people;” of criticizing China’s politics and culture while showing concern with the fate of the nation and its ecological balance; accepting criticism only to reinforce the legitimacy of the status quo and Maoist principles; or separating self from the collective by stressing the inferiority of the political, social, cultural, and even human elements of the Chinese nation.

This examination of the dynamics of positional identification also revealed how the four prongs of cultural identity intersect in the construction of identities. Although ideological debate activates primarily the dimension of spirituality, the other three, individuality, sociality, and materiality form part of matrix of identity that allows individuals to define their sense of self and perceptions of others. Thus, the responses to ideological debates show how COOCs—whether critical or defensive of China—might define a position stressing individuality and the distinction between individuals and the mass. While some might be more driven to sociality, striving to connect to the social reality of China to enact a sociocultural affiliation, others respond through the scope of materiality, prioritizing economic bases and accentuating material necessities in their assertion of Chinese identity. Yet another set might approach directly to the spirituality, elevating cultural attitudes and national sentiment as the basis for identification. The boundaries among these positionings are

not clear-cut for the different dimensions are mingled in the constitution of a particular position of identification. For example, cultural pride or patriotic sentiment, reflective of one's sociality, might be expressed along with one's view on the imperative of meeting the material needs of the people, which reflects the dimension of materiality. In other cases, commentators start with references to individual human factors and move on to talk about China's social reality, based upon which they might establish their ideological/spiritual preferences in a direct manner – as in the case of COOCs that challenged the CCP by arguing that its dominance is the reason for China's social and moral degeneration. This position was clearly articulated by one commentator in this manner:

Incrementally, the Central Administration is losing its credibility and adherence from its people. When the real crisis comes forth and the Central Administration could no longer call upon its people, China will become the former Soviet Union, out of the will of all anti-China forces. China, yes indeed, you cannot continue to degenerate like this. Only a government that prioritizes people's benefits can lead its people towards real national prosperity. China, please don't get rid of your real spirit established in the Mao's era.

Lastly, the analysis of data identified that yet another prominent feature in COOCs' construction of their ideological positioning is how perceptions of China's position in the global environment mediate the enactment of individual and group positions of identification. Generally, the articulation of an ideological position and sense of cultural membership is supported by a particular stance on and analysis of the relationship between China and the West, which is often posed as one's position in regards the rivalry between China and the United States. Often, COOCs'

understandings of China in the global context were expressed as either a perception that tensions between China and Western hegemony were increasing and would lead to change along the lines of the democratic reforms favored by critics of the regime, or a perception that diminished the capacity of Western powers to dominate China and viewed a global environment with less competition and hostility against China. These debates suggest the importance of intercultural contact for the construction of identity positions among Chinese living abroad.

In reference to the research line of intergroup sensitivity effect, the current textual analysis shows more complicated and essential differences between COOCs' responses to outgroup and ingroup criticisms. Such qualitative differences can be attributed to the characteristics of COOCs' cultural identification, which is inherently related to their perception of global context and China's current and historical position. More exposed to outgroup cultural criticisms against China, perhaps more aware of China's quandary as the world's punching bag, and more used to Western China-bashing propaganda, COOCs might be on the lower end of individual ethnocentrism's scale. In order to cultivate cultural detachment necessary for their survival overseas, COOCs are more readily tolerant than their peers in China of cultural criticisms originated from non-Chinese sources. On the other hand, due to strengthened cultural core in both directions of cultural shame and cultural pride, COOCs' responses to ingroup cultural criticisms tend to be complicated with more plausible interpretations in making sense of the motives of the ingroup critics from the scope formed by their

individuality, sociality, and materiality. Out of cultural shame, the COOCs who agree with ingroup cultural criticisms might stress individual distinctiveness in their alignment with the critics. Out of cultural pride, those who oppose ingroup cultural criticisms might emphasize the significance of elevated cultural position in one's social and mental stability. Generally, according to the analysis of this chapter, different from the pattern indicated by intergroup sensitivity effect, COOCs showed more references of individuality in their interpretations of the motives of ingroup cultural critics and more references of global context for taking outgroup cultural critics for granted.

CHAPTER VII: DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Review of Study

This dissertation examined how Chinese individuals living overseas who participate in the cyber-ethnic community created by the website Wuencity.com interact with one another in this virtual community to make sense of intercultural differences in their new environments, cope with life challenges in the multicultural settings they inhabit, and assert their ideological positions regarding the position of China in the global context. The analysis presented here shows how in the articulation of their reactions to news and opinions about China posted online and in debates with one another, these Chinese overseas online commentators (COOCs) enact a sense of Chinese cultural identity that conveys both the heterogeneity within this population as well as some group peculiarities. Furthermore, the communicative practices observed allow us to explore the complexity of identity performance in processes of cultural identification that are prompted by intercultural interaction.

In the present study, I employed an interpretive approach to intercultural communication and the procedures of grounded theory methodology to elucidate the problem under study. The works of three intercultural communication scholars—Carbaugh, Collier, and Hecht—who have advanced the interpretive perspective to communication and identity informed the theoretical framework guiding the conceptualization of the problem, methodological design, and interpretation of data. The procedures of grounded theory methodology were followed for the processing,

coding, and analysis of data selected to identify relevant categories and concepts and their relations. In this chapter, I will summarize the answers to the main research questions explored, and discuss the theoretical implications of the findings of this study for the study of identity, its limitations, and suggestions for further study.

The main research questions that guided this investigation were:

1. How do Chinese individuals living overseas use online communication to construct a sense of identity in the context of intercultural interaction abroad?

2. What does online discourse reveal about the dynamics of cultural identification among the Chinese in the diaspora?

3. What does online communication processes tell about the complex interrelations among dimensions of identity?

In response to research question 1, the analysis of data revealed that COOCs used online communication via Wuencity.com to engage in three primary communicative practices through which they performed a sense of identity: a) to make sense of perceived cultural differences in the multicultural societies they inhabit through self-other comparison, b) to give and receive practical advice on how to manage conflict, suffering or misunderstanding that result from exposure to new cultural environments outside China, and c) to debate and assume ideological positions in reaction to criticism posed by Chinese and non-Chinese critics of China.

In response to research question 2, I posit that each of these categories of communicative practice revealed a particular dynamic of cultural identification that I

have labeled perceptual identification, strategic identification, and positional identification. Each of these forms of identification reflects the internal tensions and heterogeneity of the group in question as well as the shared understandings that give the group a sense of cohesion as members of the Chinese culture. And in response to research question 3, I will argue that the data also illustrate how identity enactment is about the dynamic intersection and rotation of the dimensions of identity that I term individuality, sociality, spirituality and materiality in the complex matrix of identity.

COOCs' Cultural Identification

COOCs' commentary messages evoked by China-related news topics are reliable and meaningful textual proofs reflecting their group psychology, which can be represented and interpreted by the concepts of cultural identity and identification. Online setting and global context permit and facilitate such discursive manifestation of COOCs' cultural identification at such a large group level. According to social identity theory, what motivates COOCs to connect with other ingroup and enact their cultural identity with their commentary responses is about everyone's internal demand for positive and distinctive cultural image. Cultural identity theories integrated in the matrix framework of cultural identity can further explain the prevalent internal fragmentations and positional heterogeneity among COOCs. From divergent cultural cores, in diverse contextual perceptions, and through various prismatic lenses formed by different identity dimensions, the fragmentation and heterogeneity of COOCs' manifested cultural identification seem consequential. As Stuart Hall (1996) posits,

sometimes study of internal fragmentation of cultural identity can be more meaningful.

Notions developed from close analyses of the selective data can be utilized to answer the three general research questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese individuals living overseas use online communication to construct a sense of identity in the context of intercultural interaction abroad?

The analysis of data revealed that COOCs used online communication via Wenxuecity.com to engage in three primary communicative practices through which they performed a sense of identity. First, they use self-other comparison to make sense of perceived cultural differences in the multicultural societies they inhabit. Responding to perceived racial, gender and other cultural differences, COOCs tend to use self-other comparison as a strategy to communicate their sense of place in the social order of their adopted societies. Through comparison, some stress cultural opposition to maintain a sense of unity within and distinction of their cultural identity, while some downplay cultural differences to stress individuality and enact different degrees of cultural detachment from Chinese culture. Second, COOCs use online communication to give and receive advice on how to manage conflict, suffering or misunderstanding that result from exposure to new cultural environments outside China. Responding to cultural challenges and seeking to foster a positive group image, COOCs engage in a form of cultural counseling to offer practical strategies for cultural survival across national borders. Third, the virtual community serves COOCs as a forum for ideological debate where they assume ideological positions in reaction

to criticism posed by Chinese and non-Chinese critics of China. In ideological debates, COOCs manifest their positions as critics or defenders of China and its peoples, thus showing their internal heterogeneity via vehement positional clashes. Through these communicative practices, commentators enacted processes of individual and group identification as Chinese living overseas.

RQ1a: How does the immediate multicultural living environment influence identification processes? Intercultural contact in global contexts facilitates COOCs' process of cultural identification. In close proximity to the host society, COOCs become more aware of their cultural identity as individuals jugged in contrast to other local or global cultural groups. As presented in Chapter four, the most salient cultural differences in the local context that generated discussion among COOCs were race, gender and group stereotyping and nationality. On the topic of race and ethnicity, self-other comparisons involve the construction of hierarchical racial orders, with strong emphasis on creating oppositions between groups. Overall, the discussion of racial differences leads to the self-positioning of the Chinese as a disadvantaged group in local and global racial hierarchies. Simultaneously, through polarized generalizations about Chinese vs. Western sojourners, some commentators asserted their perception of the disadvantageous reality faced by Chinese individuals abroad when compared to the privileged treatment of Westerners in China. Likewise, when reacting to gender and other group stereotypes, COOCs generally perceived themselves as a cohesive group singled out for negative characterization by outsiders.

They tended to identify themselves with Chinese culture in a gesture of spectatorship, cheering or booing as they accepted, rejected or re-thought the stereotypes constructed by others in Western cultures. Using comparison through opposition, COOCs saw their gender/sexual identity bound by common lines of racial and ethnic identity and history as Chinese. In contrast to discussions about race and stereotyping, discussions about national character featured a much more fragmented spectrum of positions of identification and fluid sense of individual and group identity. Overall, the debates exposed a divide between critics of Chinese culture and society and those who defend the moral traits of the Chinese collective identity while accusing Chinese critics of xenocentrism. Defenders of Chinese culture enacted a clearly defined sense of group identity bound by loyalty and affective attachment to Chinese nationality and citizenship. This positioning places them in an antagonistic relation with COOCs who compared Chinese and Western nations to stress the moral flaws of the Chinese and the economic and social underdevelopment of China, while affirming identification with the superiority of Western values and social systems. Those who are critical of Chinese culture and peoples tend to enact a more individualist and pragmatist sense of identity that allows them to seek accommodation or conciliation of differences as a rational strategy for cultural survival and economic success in their host societies. Thus, as they make sense of their differences and similarities with other groups, some react by expressing strong sentimental connections with their motherland and attachment to Chinese culture while others prefer to curb emotional

attachment and cultivate different degrees of cultural distance from their Chinese cultural core to deal with negative images and perceptions of their group and culture in the host societies.

As discussed in Chapter five, textual evidence also indicates that lived experiences of life predicaments in host societies also provide insights about self and other cultures that COOCs' exchange online in the form of advice to preserve individual and collective well being. The discourse analyzed showed that intercultural conflicts prompted instances of COOCs sympathetic support for other Chinese subjects facing conditions of marginalization and victimization as outsiders in a foreign culture. Binding them is the awareness of the disadvantaged social position and negative cultural image of Chinese individuals in the contexts of host societies. Notwithstanding the fervent discussions showing solidarity and cohesiveness as a dominant trend, some texts also reveal how some COOCs are reluctant to identify with their Chinese compatriots by relying on individualistic approaches to life predicaments.

Overall, COOCs' responses indicate that intercultural interaction heightens their awareness of differences and prompts identification processes in which they stress group unity when they discuss social disadvantages faced by the group. Simultaneously, group division and various degrees of detachment from Chinese culture tend to be enacted when the attention shifts to what to do about negative perceptions or situations encountered by Chinese individuals overseas.

RQ1b: How does global politics influence identification processes? The data presented also suggest that a salient influence in the negotiation of personal and group identity among Chinese living overseas are the contending perceptions of China's global position and international relations—particularly the China-Western relations—and how these influence their personal and social lives. In a context that heightens global awareness and due to different perceptions of global power structures, COOCs favor a variety of ideological positions that affect their the enactment of their sense of identity, as illustrated in Chapter six. For instance, among those who perceived mounting external pressures against China, the divergent tendencies were to stress cultural attachment and a defensive attitude or to stress a critical attitude and individualist detachment from group membership. In this sense, their ideological position on China's global position was a major factor influencing their identification with Chinese culture.

RQ2: What does online discourse reveal about the dynamics of cultural identification among the Chinese in the diaspora?

Across these three levels of interaction, COOCs' cultural identification is characterized by the interplay of convergence and division. This dialectic tension between group convergence and division is expressed through a set of recurring interpretive framework and rhetorical strategies featuring a) emphasis on cultural opposition or cultural similarities when defining cultural boundaries, b) cultural attachment or detachment to Chinese culture, and 3) expression of cultural shame and

cultural pride. These tensions are fueled by participants' life realities and their negotiation of the multiple dimensions of their cultural identity.

RQ2a: What are the most salient points of convergence within the group?

With increased multicultural awareness, COOCs demonstrated points of convergence, the most salient of which are their common sense of marginalization, low status in host societies, poor image in host cultures, and heightened nationalist sentiments. As elaborated in Chapters four and five, in responding to debates of perceived cultural differences and compatriots' life predicaments, COOCs consensually manifested their sense of marginalization in the host society. Their commentary responses also contained concerns about inevitable challenges resulting from the low status and poor image of the Chinese culture in the host societies. In most cases, when the discussion shifts to the solutions to such challenges, divergent points emerge to fuel debate and divide the group.

RQ2b: What are the most salient internal divisions within the group?

The diversity of opinions aired in COOCs' messages attests to the fragmentary nature of cultural identification among members of the ingroup. The main sources of division in the group are caused by COOCs contending ideological positions regarding China's political regime; varying levels of attachment to or detachment from a Chinese nationalist sentiment vs. levels of attachment to or detachment from the perception of Western societies as superior; and the split between

individualist/pragmatic and collective/idealist in the approach to intercultural conflict and negotiation of solutions to it.

RQ3: What does online communication reveal about the complex interrelations among the dimensions of identity?

COOCs' responses to specific topics and debates demonstrate how these activate different dimensions of cultural identity. Even though COOCs' responses have focal points that emphasize identification through perceptions and interpretation of cultural difference (Chapter four), principles and strategies for action (Chapter five), or ideological positionings (Chapter six), some underlying dynamics of the complexity of identity enactment are revealed across focal points.

Generally, identification is articulated through strategic rotations of the four identity dimensions described earlier: individuality, sociality, materiality, and spirituality. For example, in dealing with negative stereotypes of Chinese identity in the host culture, many COOCs stress the significance of individuality and downplay their cultural affiliation (sociality), even when acknowledging the social dimensions of being stereotyped by Westerners. And as illustrated in Chapter five, in order to deal with the burden or shame regarding China's historical disgrace, many COOCs advise other ingroup members to separate and rotate from individual shame to social or group affirmation of national pride (sociality). Although the discourse on nationality exhibits significant fragmentation and group division, COOCs can manifest group cohesion as reflected in their affirmation of a positive and distinctive

group identity along the lines of national pride or favorable characterization of moral character (spirituality) over individual pragmatism (materiality).

However, as a general trend and as they gain a more profound understanding of the multicultural realities of their host societies, COOCs recognize that Chinese identity—the central nexus defining their group membership and identity in the eyes of others—is neither powerful nor favorable. Therefore, to foster positive cultural identification, they tend to rotate to personal achievement (individuality) as more significant than group image or collective action (sociality). In this sense, as textual evidence shows, there is a tendency toward spectatorship among COOCs, with only a very limited number of comments mentioning group efforts or a concrete political agenda to collectively address biases, discrimination and hate in host societies. Although sensitive to how their cultural image is shaped in the eyes of others, and interested in developing strategies to prevent frustration and overreaction in other ingroup members, generally COOCs distance themselves from political and cultural arenas where they expect to see others prevail.

Cultivating individuality and cultural distance turns out to be a basic tactic among COOCs who want to maintain emotional stability and thrive across borders. In sum, growing individuality, the strategic management of cultural attachment to Chinese culture to ensure professional success (materiality) and social adaptation (sociality), and deep fragmentation along ideological lines (spirituality) become the most salient identity dimensions in COOCs' online cultural identification.

Discussion: Theoretical Implications

This dissertation is a qualitative study grounded in online textual data guided by an interpretive framework integrated from theory of cultural identity. The analytical findings illustrate some tenets and principles of cultural identity theory and meanwhile also extend this framework of cultural identity via the communication perspective of complexity. Cultural identity is defined here as one's self-concept formed and performed in communication that emphasizes one's connection to cultural membership. Cultural identification is the enactment of cultural identity. Cultural identity is a complexity construct equivalent to the concept of self across cultural borderline. Cultural identification is the communication of cultural identity's properties in its structural and dynamic complexity. The complexity of cultural identification involves the diversity, fragmentation, and interplay of cultural identity manifested in particular communication channels. COOCs' commentaries evidence such complexity. This section discusses about what theoretical contribution the current study can make to the study of cultural identity in the communication perspective of complexity. First, I discuss some conceptual dialects that constitute the fragmentation of cultural identity. Second, I argue that the tree forms of cultural identification identified in this study have relatively divergent positional features defined by the structural salience of different identity dimensions. Third, regarding the interplay among cultural identity dimensions, I elaborate the theoretical implications in light of the contextual influences and constraints of online and

intercultural settings on the manifestation of individual and group cultural identification. Lastly, I link the results of the current study to literature of identity, media, and Chinese diaspora to illuminate a complex model of Chinese identity. The discussion of theoretical implications is followed by a section on limitations and future orientations of the current research.

Fragmentation Represented by Dialectics

As Hall (1996) posits, cultural identity's internal fragmentation is more important than its often assumed homogeneity for the outsiders. Heterogeneity from within can represent one primary aspect of the characteristics of cultural identity. This tenet is particularly true for intercultural communication scholars in an era of Internet, when people can be more connected with each other and therewith more exposed to differences and more expressive with different personal views. Analytical findings from chapter four, five and six illustrate such internal fragmentation of COOCs' cultural identification, which can be represented and explained by a series of conceptual dialectics – critical vs. defensive cultural core, depreciated vs. appreciated perception of external tension, cultural opposition vs. cultural similarity, and cultural shame vs. cultural pride.

These dialects constitute COOCs' internal tension manifested in their commentaries, which can then be interpreted by the concept of cultural spectatorship. These concepts are developed from the application of cultural identity theory in the analysis grounded in selected COOC's discourses. These concepts can be applied to

describe and interpret COOCs' identity performance. The theoretical value of these derivative concepts lie in how they can extend the systematic understanding of the complexity of cultural identity.

Critical vs. defensive cultural core. The cultural core is defined in this research as a socially constructed and varying sense of affiliation with one's cultural membership that is communicated spontaneously and connects various dimensions of identity. In the matrix of cultural identity, the cultural core interconnects the four primary dimensions. Such a structural feature implies that cultural core has a relative stable positioning and can be reflected through the scopes formed by combinatorial effects of different identity properties. Individuals with similar sets of life realities might have quite opposite cultural cores. Among COOCs' commentary responses, the demarcation of critical and defensive cultural cores is clear and their conflict is hard to reconcile, especially in the forums with political and ideological theses. In understanding one's cultural identity, through the lenses of one's life realities, we expect one's cultural core to vary in reference to identity dimensions and to influence rhetorical strategies. When examined through the matrix of cultural identity proposed in this dissertation, COOCs' messages can become heuristic for probing the cultural core even though individual life realities do not necessarily determine the cultural core. The concept of cultural core in the total structure of cultural identity can be applied in communication studies to many meaningful themes related to culture, ideology, and relationships.

Cultural opposition vs. cultural similarity. One primary force driving cultural identification originates in cultural comparison. Particularly in perceptual cultural identification when people are responding to perceived cultural difference, they tend to resort to cultural comparison in enacting or asserting their cultural identity. As the analytical findings in Chapter four indicate, when making sense of differences through cultural comparison, COOCs might either highlight cultural oppositions or downplay and trivialize differences while deliberately stressing cultural similarities. Generally, from the perspective of cultural opposition, intercultural contact becomes more problematic and challenging; in the perspective of cultural similarity, cultural accommodation becomes necessary and valuable. However, those who stress cultural opposition and those who value cultural similarity might have the same set of motives: to manage inevitable uncertainty and anxiety in intercultural contact through different orientations. Those for cultural opposition might hope to ease out personal cognitive uncertainty by blaming it on the systematic incompatibility of two cultures. Those for cultural similarity may be inclined to cope with intercultural uncertainty and anxiety by transcending differences through the stress on the ontological or essential commonality of cultures. Both interpretive orientations are apparent in the commentaries examined. This suggests that comparison is a driving force in cultural identification and it might be more dynamic and situational than the manifestation of the cultural core. The orientation of cultural comparison is not reflexive of cultural core but might be easily confounded as

reflection of cultural core by the others. For instance, messages stressing cultural opposition may be more easily regarded as from defensive cultural core while messages with cultural similarity more inclined to be taken as from critical cultural core. Potential intercultural tension resulting from cultural misunderstanding might root in such cultural misperception. Certainly, this dialectic of cultural opposition and cultural similarity and its relationship to the cultural core can open a line of research about intercultural conflict and resolution.

Cultural sensitivity vs. cultural detachment. The seemingly contradictory concepts of sensitivity and detachment might both be strategic goals pursued by those who have to manage their cultural identification across cultural borderlines. Cultural sensitivity or the ability to perceive cultural differences has been widely researched in areas related to human interaction involving two or more cultures. Cultural detachment is not necessarily an antithesis of cultural sensitivity or cultural insensitivity. In effect cultural detachment can be seen as a degree of cultural sensitivity that reflects deliberate neglect. Detachment may be an individual's strategy to manage prejudice or maltreatment by culturally different others. As shown in Chapter five, cultural detachment is a strategy recommended by many commentators in their practical advice to others when discussing life predicaments encountered in intercultural contact. The analysis of COOCs' commentaries containing cultural strategies implies that cultural detachment can be promoted, learned, and cultivated on the basis of cultural sensitivities. Cultural detachment can

help prevent oversensitivity and any consequential overreaction. At perceptual and cognitive levels, it is cultural sensitivity; at strategic level, it becomes cultural detachment. Compared to cultural sensitivity, cultural detachment might be more significant for those who are underprivileged, marginalized, and in relatively low power position in their interaction with the more advantageous culturally different others. In the imbalanced power structure, cultural sensitivity is more demanded for those who are communicating with the underprivileged cultural others and cultural detachment is more needed by sojourners like COOCs in their interactions with mainstream host individuals and institutions. The interconnection of and distinction between cultural sensitivity and cultural detachment as illustrated in Chapter five can inspire another line of intercultural communication research.

Cultural pride vs. cultural shame. Self-bound cultural sentiment related to positive or negative attitude toward one's cultural membership can be revealed in COOCs' online commentaries. In cultural identification, one can express one's cultural pride or positive sentiment or reveal one's cultural shame or negative sentiment towards one's own culture. Expression of cultural pride might be perceived as cultural threat by outgroups with cultural animosity and therein discouraged by strategic ingroups. On the other hand, marginalized and oppressed in the host society, sojourners like COOCs might feel special need for expressing cultural pride to amend their impaired self-esteem. Around a tensional line between expression and discouragement of cultural pride are there often heated discussions in the researched

forums since the participants are presumably in countries other than China. The arguments are often related to the participants' perception of the external cultural environment. Contrary to cultural pride, cultural shame is assumed to be more consonant with outgroup audiences, particularly those with political or cultural animosity against China, and is expressed by some COOCs to foster cultural detachment. Cultural shame might be more easily expressed by more self-content, ego-centric ingroups with critical cultural core, who have appreciated perception of China's external tensions. The cultural sentiments of pride and shame can be mutually transformed in certain topics by some COOCs. For instance, in discussions about China's historical burdens and national disgrace, the expressed cultural shame evoked by memory of national disgrace is purposefully transformed into China's moral advantage as source for cultural pride by COOCs with defensive cultural core. In the researched forums, COOCs often engage in debates about the moral, sentimental, and practical basis of Chinese nationalism expressed as extreme forms of cultural pride, and on Chinese xenocentrism expressed as an extreme form of cultural shame. In short, the interplay of cultural pride and cultural shame characterizes COOCs' online cultural identification, which can be linked also to the notion of cultural spectatorship.

Cultural spectatorship. Cultural spectatorship refers to a mindset in which cultural members are driven to observation and discussion of their culture's interaction with other cultures from a certain distance due to personal preference or restriction, especially when such interaction turns into some sort of competition or

clash. Curiosity and sentimental distance help define cultural spectatorship. COOCs' forums are like bleachers where spectators are allowed to watch the game and choose a side between the guest team and the host. Cultural pride and cultural shame influence the spectators' choices of favorite sides. Under the influence of cultural pride, the majority of cultural spectators like COOCs might choose to support their own culture as the guest team competing in the host arena. Guided by the feeling of cultural shame and constrained by the host environment, some of the spectators might convert themselves to support the host and meanwhile make critical commentaries against the visiting team. Such a notion of cultural spectatorship can help describe the characteristics of COOCs' online cultural identification and explain its fragmentation. It can also help depoliticize or reduce the ideological implication of the internal divisions among the COOCs, who can be viewed more as people opting for freedom outside their homeland.

In a nutshell, internal fragmentation or the heterogeneity of cultural identity can be represented by a system of dialects such as critical vs. defensive cultural core, cultural attitude defined by perceptual opposition or homogenization, and cultural sentiment characterized by cultural shame or pride. The two dimensional dialects of cultural identity's primary properties are also integral part of such a dialectic system, whose theoretical implications will be illuminated next.

Positional Saliencies in the Three Forms of Cultural Identification

Variance of cultural identification can be defined by the salient positions of

different identity dimensions. Cultural identification can occur in all kinds of communication channels. In Chapter two, cultural identity is defined as one's self-concept formed and performed in communication that emphasizes one's connection to cultural membership. Cultural identification is the enactment of cultural identity. In the perspective of communication, cultural identity is formed and reflected in one's realization and manifestation of their life realities – individuality, sociality, materiality, and spirituality. COOCs' messages evidence the aforesaid internal fragmentation, expressed through interpretive frameworks that are shaped by COOCs' life realities. COOCs disclose their diverse attitudes, attributes, strategies, and preferences via contingent and yet profound sentiments in reference to various sets of identity dimensions. For instance, to deal with negative stereotypes against Chinese cultural image, some stress individuality over one's sociality in terms of their group membership or cultural identification. It seems that they might feel less stress if they feel responsible only as individuals. Some other COOCs just avoid personal responsibility for positive self identification by blaming their cultural affiliation. It seems that these individuals can feel reassured by highlighting their disadvantaged group position or culturally defined social status. To manage life predicaments, COOCs propose various strategies and advocate cultural detachment by deliberately undoing cultural stigmas developed through the indoctrination of their old country. To settle down internal ideological clashes, some resort to spirituality while some others go to materiality for balancing solutions. Overall, different salient positions of the

four structural dimensions of cultural identity characterize the three main categories of COOCs' cultural identification – perceptual, strategic, and positional cultural identification.

The salience of individuality in perceptual cultural identification. In perceptual cultural identification, one reinforces one's sense of self in contrast to cultural traits observed in the host society. The individual culture-crossing experience in cross-cultural contexts might more effectively activate self-awareness simply due to daily contact with other ingroups. Therefore one might start to view oneself and the outside world more through the scope of individuality, with reference to personal merits such as career, achievement, strength, and perceived positive disposition. Even in the Internet virtual community where they can encounter other ingroups, COOCs still stress the significance of individual matters in the host society and promote avoidance of group avowals when dealing with stereotypes against Chinese identity. Although to manifest one's cultural identity when perceiving cultural differences one can refer to the others' life realities, a steadfast preference to their individuality turns out to be apparent in COOCs' forums. In the salient position of individuality, one's cultural identification is enacted with reference to the uniqueness and autonomy of the individual as the principal premise that dictates orientations to sociality, materiality, and spirituality.

The salience of sociality in strategic cultural identification. In strategic cultural identification to help other ingroups deal with life challenges in intercultural

context, an individual might have the inclination of emphasizing the impact of group membership on the individuals' cultural survival in the host society. The interpretive basis of cultural consulting lies in the debate between individual versus group causes for maltreatment of ingroup individuals in the host society. Hence, sub-elements of sociality such as cultural membership and group position might be relatively more often highlighted in advising. Since the observation is more directed toward understanding other ingroups' life predicaments, one's internal demand for positive cultural membership might be activated as the dominating motivation for communication acts of cultural identification. In the salient position of sociality, one's cultural identification is enacted with reference to cultural membership as the principal premise that dictates orientations to individuality, materiality, and spirituality.

The salience of spirituality in positional cultural identification. In positional cultural identification to assert one's ideological preference and tackle ideological clashes in the global context, one might develop arguments with an interpretive tendency towards spirituality. Arguments with reference to individual, social, and/or material dimensions tend to be oriented to the manifestation of an individual's ideological position. The heuristic dimension of spirituality is deeply rooted in and profoundly reflective of one's cultural core and can be seen more in the online's anonymous settings even if constrained to topical specificity (Dong, 2009). In the salient position of spirituality, cultural identification is enacted with reference to ideological and affective positions as the premise that dictates orientation to

individuality, sociality, and materiality.

In this research, the difference in salient positions of identity dimensions is categorical though it suggests its value for an empirical, quantitative study of its variance. Categorically different salient positions might be further classified into some finer categories or subcategories, which is beyond the scope of current research and to be discussed in terms of this research's future orientations.

Interrelationships between and among Identity Properties

Variance of cultural identification can also be defined by the rotation of four different identity dimensions. Such rotation might result in gaps, discrepancies, and interplays between identity dimensions, which might represent different psychological states of the identifier. In the world of online discourse, relatively stable salient positions are the result of rotations that result in different forms of cultural identification. However, in real life and person-to-person or entity-to-entity contexts, the rotation can be highly contextual, temporary, fluctuating, and variegated. A brief discussion about the potential correlations between psychological states associated with identity gaps and the structural rotation of identity dimensions can help illuminate an important aspect of the theoretical implications of the identity model employed in the current study.

One theoretical premise of these correlations is that gaps or discrepancies between identity dimensions are the result of differential positional salience and perceptual orientation of individuals. Yet, different degrees of saliency of identity

dimensions might cause individual difficulty to manage smooth rotation of the identity structure. The following discussion lies on this notion that seemingly contradictory identity positions are the result of the positional salience of certain dimensions of identity. The concept of salience means the different degrees of activated awareness or mindfulness of one's various life realities. Constrained by certain contexts, salient positions might lead to inadvertent oblivion of some other identity dimensions, which might become mental basis of certain temporary personality disorders such as narcissistic, schizoid, and dependent ones. For instance, an individual given a high power position might have a different degree of awareness of such power or social position than others relative to one's awareness of realities. Perceptual orientation refers to how one's observations lead to enactment of cultural identity. Around the four basic identity dimensions, such perceptual orientations might include the two pairs of dialectic tensions from individuality to sociality or vice versa and from materiality to spirituality or vice versa. For instance, cultural spectatorship as illustrated in Chapter four is a psychological state featuring individuality-to-sociality perceptual orientation. In other cases, such as online commentaries regarding how to deal with negative stereotypes against Chinese cultural image, the observational direction features more of sociality-to-individuality. In forums of political, ideological debates, the perceptual orientation from materiality to spirituality tends to be more prevalent. The intersection of the two pairs of dialectical tensions can result some more delicate categories of perceptual orientations, which can explain

the variety of online commentaries.

In a nutshell, the structure of the four-prong cultural identity model and its dynamic features might be a key to the intricacy of individual and group psychology in cross-cultural and intercultural context. The application of this key can help provide heuristic insights for more regional and specific practical challenges and empirical inquiries.

The Complexity of Chinese Identity in the Global Context – Connecting to Literature on Identity, Media, and Chinese Diaspora.

With a focus on one unique, clamorous cyber ethnic quarter in the bustling and boisterous Internet “megalopolis,” the results of this study resound with current literature on identity issues in media and cultural studies. The results reinforce Stuart Hall’s exposition on the increasing fragmented identity manifested in discourses that are produced by those who share the same identity and are more accessible to mass audiences (1996). Beyond nation, race, class, and ideology, the current study identified new, finer categories to represent the differentiation of cultural identification even from the same cultural group. These categories illustrate the structural multidimensionality and dynamic rotation of identity positions. The reported internal divisions in this study can illustrate Hall’s idea on the internal, “psychic mechanism” of identity, which has become more evident in the new media environment with constantly expanding ranges of participants. Furthermore, the observed trend to individualization among COOCs exemplifies Hokinson’s (2007)

proposition that the Internet helps society become more and more individualized. On the other hand, this study also corroborates Mitra's (2002) observation of the cultural convergence effect of the Internet. The current study expands the literature by stressing the dialectic tension between the trend of individualization and the effect of cultural convergence – the Internet becomes a place for ingroup individuals to collectively express their preference for individualization.

This study is also linked genealogically to literature on Chinese identity in diaspora. The findings relate to the more current status of newer members of the Chinese diaspora worldwide and reflect finer internal divisions and more diverse survival strategies in the more contemporary, post-colonial, post-911, and broader global context. COOCs, who are the source of the current study's textual data, represent what Chan (2006) described as the new migrants from China in global cities who are relatively more educated and from more diverse regions of origin than the earlier colonial coolies from a couple of southern provinces in China and therein face more identity options and internal debates. Not only can the heightened online discussions by COOCs fit the ideological model identified by Ward (1965, quoted in Chan, 2006) but the augmented chasm and intensified fragmentation embedded in blatant ideological debates might form a new complex model of Chinese identity in global context. On the one hand, such a complex model of Chinese identity can lead to a more profound understanding of Chinese global presentation; on the other hand, the increased complexity in Chinese national characterization represents the

maturation of the nation and advancement of a national culture. Hence the chaotic internal division described by Keane (2003) as “China imploding” might have positive implications if given a more complete and more balanced interpretation with richer data. This coincided with my impetus for writing this dissertation.

Limitations and Future Orientations of the Study

The current study is an application of an integrated cultural identity model in the interpretive analysis of online discourse purposefully selected. This close reading of data does have some methodological and theoretical limitations that imply future orientations.

The most obvious limitation of this study is the purposeful selection of online discourse data. With new events constantly coming out on a daily basis, more forums with more heated discussions seem always better than the old pool of data. For example, around the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Xiaobo Liu and Chinese American pianist Lang Lang’s White House performance, online debates were unprecedentedly fervent. However, the concepts developed from this data grounded analysis can be applied in the analysis of randomly selected instances of discourse in a new, larger data set for future projects aiming to contribute to the construction of cultural identity theory.

Another limitation of this study is related to the representativeness of the selected website and the participating commentators as members of the Chinese overseas community. As I observe, among my Chinese friends, Wenxuecity.com is

only one of several major Chinese portal websites. Besides Wenxuecity.com, other popular Chinese overseas websites include mit.bbs.com, backchina.com, and boxun.com. Of course, wexuecity.com is still the one that attracts the largest number of commentaries. Many of my Chinese friends, especially younger ones, who just arrived, seem to be more dependent on the major Chinese portal Websites headquartered inside China, such as sohu.com, netease.com, sina.com, and qq.com. They were already seasoned netizens before leaving China. For some Chinese with critical cultural cores, Wenxuecity.com is too “pro-China” and thereby to be avoided. So the internal divisions over some political debates within the COOCs might not empirically reflect the actual internal divisions among the Chinese and not even among the Chinese overseas.

In addition, the characteristics of COOCs’ cultural identification summarized in the findings are heuristic for understanding Chinese culture as manifested in its members’ collective understandings but might be problematic in terms of empirical representation of the group. First, online anonymity and the website’s easy registration allow one individual to post commentaries under multiple aliases. Some of the COOCs might actually play both sides (trolling) by disguising themselves with their opponents’ intonation and then attacking accordingly to create the scenario that might or might not fit their positions over certain issues. Second, participants with varied motives might contribute to various forums by contingency. On the one hand, COOCs participate voluntarily with no explicit external pressures such as institutional

requirement or monetary benefits, so the data contain spontaneous messages that reflect their mentalities. On the other hand, participating COOCs themselves might have unique character profiles that distinguishes them from general Chinese overseas, for instance being inclined or more subjected to extreme ideological positions. Besides, the timing of hot debated events might also influence both quantity and quality of commentaries, such as in summer time, holidays, or final week in the end of semesters. Third, the website's webmaster or forums' administrators have the capability to delete posted comments and permanently or temporarily ban particular user IDs, and evidently they often execute such regulatory power. For attracting more viewers, the editorials might actually deliberately pretend to be either or both sides of the debates to instigate more tensions if necessary. So to some degree, the online scenarios might actually reflect the preferences of the personnel with technological authority even though the website claims to be neutral and eclectic. This limitation suggests that future research should include a larger data set as well as personal interviews or survey to enhance representativeness of this population.

Finally, although the three general forms of cultural identification manifested in COOCs' commentaries are not mutually exclusive, through "constant comparison," the three categories proved to be stable and therefore valid as interpretive tools. However, finer subcategories might be further defined but have not been developed in the current study. Regarding this limitation, future research could consider further conceptualization to refine subcategories for more specific research purposes.

Regarding these limitations, future research could consider addressing issues of representativeness by employing a positivistic paradigm and using research methods such as random sampling of Wenxuecity.com texts, surveys, and in-depth interviews with users. The corroboration through interviews with actual users can not only strengthen the validity of present study but also extend and even alter the conceptual system developed from current research. However, the heuristic value gained from the current study can still be a productive start along the way of exploring how people culturally survive over the cultural borderlines.

Conclusion

This dissertation presents an interpretive study of online discourse with emphasis on the textual analysis of cultural identification patterns among Chinese overseas online commentators. The interpretive framework of cultural identification draws on the theories of three intercultural communication scholars—Donal Carbaugh, Mary Jane Collier, and Michael Hecht—to stress the multi-dimensionality of identity, dynamic interaction between self and social context, and the centrality of communication in processes of cultural identification. Following some of the analytical strategies of grounded theory methodologies, I identified and labeled three primary forms of cultural identification—perceptual, strategic, and positional cultural identification—to suggest ways in which COOCs make sense of who they are as individuals and as a group of sojourners self-expelled from their homeland. In debates about historical vicissitudes, academic power structures in the host culture, racial

hierarchy, and global hegemonic structure, COOCs showed their increased cultural awareness, various personal strategies to cope with life abroad, and diverse ideological positions. The resulting fragmentary process of cultural identification can be interpreted with an analytical framework informed by an integrated theory of cultural identity. The framework focuses on four dimensions of identity: individuality, sociality, materiality, and spirituality. Using this model, this research argues that heightened individuality, stressed cultural detachment, and divided spirituality characterize COOCs' cultural identification as manifested in the discourse examined.

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