

# Sinophone, Chinese, and PRC Internet: Chinese Overseas in Australia and the PRC Internet

## Abstract

Recently, while there have been some who advocate the notion of a Sinophone Internet, approximately co-terminous with a Chinese-literate user base (Sullivan & Chen 2015), others have argued the internet in China should be known as the Chinese internet (Yang 2015: 1). This paper extends from the call to specificity to ask how the suggestion of the Chinese internet might manifest itself and what it might mean for the Chinese overseas. This is specifically in light of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the Chinese diaspora in Australia, where many individuals of Chinese ancestry may or may not speak, read, or understand *Putonghua* (i.e. Mandarin). Rather than the Chinese internet, this paper proposes that we think of the People's Republic of China (PRC) internet as one component of the multiple internets.

Keywords: Chinese internet, diaspora, Australia, PRC internet, Sinophone, Chinese-ness, Asia-as-method

## Introduction

There have been recent calls to ameliorate the hegemony of the Anglophone internet through recognition of the specificities of the medium. The argument is that there are, in fact, multiple internets differentiated in each instance by the elements of culture, language, history, access, use, and infrastructure. While there are some who advocate the notion of a Sinophone internet, approximately co-terminous with a Chinese-literate user base (Sullivan & Chen 2015), others have argued the internet in China should be known as the Chinese internet (Yang 2015: 1). This paper extends from the call to specificity to ask how the suggestion of the Chinese internet might manifest itself and what it might mean for the Chinese overseas. This is done specifically in relation to the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the Chinese diaspora in Australia, where many individuals of Chinese ancestry may or may not speak, read, or understand *Putonghua* (henceforth Mandarin). Rather than the Chinese internet, this paper proposes that we think of the People's Republic of China (PRC) internet as one component of multiple internets that now exist.

Although the paper acknowledges the historic imbrications between contemporary PRC citizens and Chinese-Australians, it seeks also to cast into relief the distinctions between the two. It argues that the disparities that exist between them extend to the internet and can only deepen as the Chinese party-state steps up its policing of the expression of Chinese culture on China's media and insists on its interpretation of internet sovereignty. This notion of internet sovereignty is as a state-centric exercise to be 'organized around treaty-based intergovernmental organizations' and is more concerned with 'equality among sovereign states' than individual rights (Mueller 2012: 181). Reviewing studies of the internet in China over two decades, Herold and de Seta note that most scholarly attention has been expended on the impact of the internet on China – in terms of democracy, blogging, e-commerce, addiction, and public sphere – rather than vice versa (Herold & de Seta 2015). According to them, it is time to begin 'looking at the many ways in which 'China' has influenced the Internet' (ibid.: 79). Considering that internet users from China now form the largest group of users in the world, Herold and de Seta's call is more urgent than ever.

With the help of twelve semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in early 2015, this paper explores the ramifications of using a term such as the Chinese internet for the Australian-Chinese diaspora. My interlocutors in this task are all individuals in Australia who self-identify as Chinese. Eight interlocutors are from China, three are from Malaysia and one is from Singapore. The earliest of them arrived in Australia in 1987 while the latest had been in Australia for three months at the time of their interview. Reflecting the various levels and types of language facility, all twelve interviews took place in a mix of Mandarin, Cantonese, Fujianese, and English. The educational level of participants ranged from Bachelor and Masters to Doctoral degrees obtained in Mainland China, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Malaysia. Their professions include office manager, geophysicist, postgraduate student, and stay-at-home parent. Two of the interviewees are male and all are of middle to upper middle class background. The youngest of the participants are between 25 to 32 years of age and the oldest are in the 45 to 54 years age group. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms have been employed in all references to them. Interviewees were recruited by snowballing so there is no claim to representation here. The aim is simply to gather some insights into the factors that distinguish the internet as used and experienced in China and outside of China from the point of view of individuals who identify as Chinese.

Through participants' sharing of how, when, and what of their internet use, the paper explores how the cultural affinities and intra-ethnic distinctions that exist within the Chinese diaspora in Australia are experienced and why they should not be glossed over in the online sphere. Writing of the Chinese diaspora, historian Wang Gungwu (2000: 57) reminds researchers to stay 'alert and open, ready to ascertain the range of meaning of each of the terms we use, and to anticipate the ramifications of using each one for a particular purpose'. Towards this end Wang (1993: 927) advocates the usage of the term 'Overseas Chinese' to refer to Chinese nationals who live abroad and 'Chinese overseas' to denote foreign nationals who are ethnic Chinese and nationals of the countries where they live such as those from Australia, Malaysia, and Singapore. The exploration here of the implications of the term 'Chinese internet' vis-à-vis 'PRC internet' comes from the same concern.

## **A China-Shaped Internet**

When the internet was first popularized, there was no question it was a Western innovation.<sup>1</sup> Prompted by the fear of communication failures from nuclear fallout, developed largely through the United States' Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) and first used at university laboratories at UCLA and Stanford Universities, the internet is, in the eyes of many, a brainchild of Western minds and cultures (Naughton 2000). It was not until the 1990s when the internet reached the masses that content in languages other than English and scientific jargon emerged on the internet. China was first connected to the internet in 1994 (Yang 2014: 135). In 20 years the number of internet users in the country has grown to 632 million, a little less than half of the population (CNNIC 2014: 13). In hindsight it is apparent that China has had a global influence on the internet. By virtue of the size of its user base, pace, and complex of indigenized technological developments and the socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions that circumscribe its use, it is possible to say that China's internet is different from that experienced elsewhere. Yang (2012: 52), for example, regards the characteristics of sociability, liveliness, and resourcefulness as integral to China's internet as are its multiple creative responses and workarounds to the threat of 'political control'.

On a more practical note, Yong argues that China's internet is a monopoly, defined after Friedman as 'a condition in which an individual or business has sufficient control over the supplies of a particular product or service to shape the terms on which other individuals

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<sup>1</sup> Hall reminds us that "the West" and "Western" are 'short-hand generalizations...that...represent very complex ideas and have no simple or single meaning' (1996: 185). The notion of the West is 'as much an idea as a fact of geography' constructed for and used here for heuristic and discursive purposes (ibid: 186).

access it' (Friedman, cited in Yong 2012: 20). Through an examination of core internet applications developed in China for local use Yong demonstrates how the internet in China is increasingly operating like a 'separate closed monopoly board' (ibid.). Amongst other things Yong (ibid.: 21-22) cites as evidence the growing preference in China between 2008-2010 for the search engine Baidu and the browser 360 over the two options ubiquitous elsewhere, i.e. Google and Internet Explorer. Likewise, Bucher (2004: 10-22) examines 'an Internet with a special Chinese shape' and argues that traits like scanning patterns (vertical vs. horizontal), aesthetical systems (abundance vs. emptiness), and web-words plus number language (e.g. the numbers 502 translates to I love you) that allude to or are derived from Chinese history, popular culture, or everyday life are emblematic of the usage and reception of a China-shaped internet. Others have more recently observed the customary scanning of QR codes in China as a means of exchanging information facilitated by the scanner function built into two of the most widely used mobile phone apps, WeChat and Weibo (Xu 2015).

On face value it would seem common sense to refer to the internet in China as the Chinese internet. As Yang (2014: 136) asserts '[t]he Internet in China has taken on such distinctly Chinese characteristics that it may now be called the Chinese Internet in the same way as we refer to China's literature as 'Chinese literature' or China's politics as 'Chinese politics'. While Yang's view agrees in essence with the argument here that the internet in China is distinct, I maintain that to use the term 'Chinese Internet' to denote the internet in China remains problematic. Unless one dismisses the Chinese overseas, the term Chinese cannot be taken to mean 'PR Chinese' by default. After all, even though English is the dominant language used on the internet in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, none of these are known as the English internet.

Admittedly, matters are rather more complicated with the Sinophone internet because of the many Chinese languages such as Cantonese, Hakka, Fujianese, and Hainanese that are still widely used around the world today. Broadly speaking the written scripts for the above Sinitic languages are derived from Mandarin but the spoken forms vary widely. Contemporarily there are also two versions of the script, traditional and simplified. Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan use the traditional form while Mainland China and Singapore favor the simplified version. Schneider (2015: 64) demonstrates the nuances of these complexities most effectively in a brief and controlled search exercise using three different Google services (Google.com, Google.com.hk, and Google.com.tw) in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. By typing the word, university (*daxue* 大学/大學), firstly in English, then simplified Chinese script followed by traditional Chinese script and making note of the search results, Schneider found among other things that on 'China's search engines, only simplified Chinese is valid Chinese' (ibid.: 72).

The point about the mutual unintelligibility of Sinitic languages is well known – a Cantonese speaker would find it near impossible to understand spoken Teochew – what is less remarked upon is how the symbolic universes that underpin the various spoken forms of the script also differ substantially. According to Dikötter, a symbolic universe is 'a collective delusional system that legitimizes the structure and values of a society... which provides people with an all-encompassing frame of reference which defines reality and bestows meaning to life' (Dikötter 1992: 32). This is akin to Anderson's notion of the nation as an 'imagined political community' that is founded on the communion that members experience despite not knowing or having met each other (Anderson 1991). The well-developed vocabularies, distinctive expressions, and phrases created by Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong and Fujianese speakers in Taiwan attest to the specific symbolic universes each of these languages generates. The Cantonese communities in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, for example, believe the currency of their language important enough to warrant strenuous protest over its perceived replacement on local television with Mandarin (ABC 2012). The development of a Hong Kong Special Character Set to facilitate networked electronic communication further

recognizes that there are characters commonly used in the written script in Hong Kong that are not found elsewhere on or offline (GovHK n.d.).

Correspondingly, the matrix of infrastructure, access, media practices, language, cultural, political, and social characteristics and restrictions that make China's internet what it is, are specific to life in Mainland China. Svensson's recent comprehensive analysis of voice and power on microblogging platform Sina Weibo, for example, stresses the 'continuing existence of digital divides in terms of access, digital skills and types of ICTs used' (Svensson 2014: 174). Still, some of the qualities characteristic of the internet in China could extend to Chinese nationals who reside away from China in their media practices and preferences. Ip and Yin (2015: 165) use the term 'Cyber China' to denote such a transnational space. They further explain that: 'Cyber China is ring-fenced and protected by rather high barriers of language competence, the netizens who frequent this space are well aware that only those with native fluency are likely to be privy to their discourse and activities' (ibid: 166). Ip and Yin also demonstrate that despite both cultural and geographic distance Mainland China's influence on online media content and direction continues to dominate in the online experience of contemporary Chinese migrants in New Zealand. Still, such extensions of influence and use are limited by the expanse of China's national borders and technological boundaries. For example, the domestic version of mobile app WeChat, known as *Weixin*, boasts many third-party features through its 'Wallet' function such as the ordering of takeaway food and tickets for the movies, railway, and flights that are of no practical use if one is outside of China or without a China-based bank account.

That the internet as experienced in China is distinct from that used elsewhere is not in dispute here. The question is whether it should be regarded as the Chinese internet. Considering Goggin's argument that 'what "we" often understand as "the" Internet is often strongly related to particular language worlds that we inhabit or of which we have some knowledge' (Goggin 2012: 360), and considering the various symbolic universes of the many kinds of Chinese spread across the globe, the term Chinese internet to describe the internet in China is inaccurate at the very least. I, therefore, suggest here that the distinctions between the various Chinese languages and symbolic universes extend online and that despite the dominant influence of the PRC on the Sinophone internet these differences should still be accommodated.

Historically, the discourse of race in China had a nineteenth-century beginning (Dikötter 1992: vii). Dikötter's thesis is that recognition of race begun as a result of the need to differentiate the people of China from the 'outside barbarians' (*waiyi* 外夷) of Africa and the West. In contrast, the 'inside barbarians' (*neiyi* 内夷) comprised of China's minorities were considered to be of too similar phenotype to the dominant Han Chinese to be differentiated (Dikötter 1992: x). Notwithstanding that the co-optation of China's minorities today is largely in the interest of maintaining the narrative of a unified, multicultural and national imaginary rather than because of any similarities based on phenotype. Moreover, as Link (2015) points out, any Han Chinese, whether born in Singapore or San Francisco, living outside China, is still considered today to be an overseas Chinese (*huaqiao* 华侨) whereas a Uighur (one of China's ethnic minorities) relocated to Uzbekistan would not be regarded in the same light. Müller (2011: 236) further argues that rather than see the take up of the Western concept of race in China at the turn of the twentieth century 'as a passive submission', it should be understood as 'active manipulation' by glocalizers to use the 'pseudo-scientificity of a global discourse to fights against local, i.e., inner-Chinese adversaries'.

In Australia the makeup of the ethnic Chinese population has changed over the past 10 to 15 years. In 1996 the total number of Cantonese speakers in Australia was 190,000, while Mandarin speakers were just 87,300, but by 2011 the number of Mandarin speakers had almost tripled to 319,500 even as Cantonese speakers climbed to 254,700 (ABS 1999; 2012). Aside from the various linguistic distinctions, intra-ethnic divisions among the Chinese

diaspora also occur along lines of class, period of arrival, and the reasons behind their migration (Benton & Gomez 2014: 1168).

In search of some insight into the issue of a China-shaped internet discussed above, I asked my interlocutors from China what happens each time they travel back to China. In particular, I asked them to reflect on and describe the internet they experienced in China. I was especially interested in if, and how, they adjusted when platforms and applications they use on a daily basis in Australia such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Gmail become of limited or zero accessibility in China.

Several of the eight individuals I spoke to began by reminding me that VPN (virtual private network) is still available as a means of circumventing restrictions even though legal and open access is much preferred. Software engineer Harry says he automatically adjusts to the constraints each time he visits China but concedes that the inconvenience is galling when it comes to research and work-related information. Few of my interlocutors were upset at the possible prospect of further curtailment but Kelly is the one who encapsulates their attitudes most pithily: 'in 2006, when Youku [online video portal] was launched in China, many people forgot that they could not access YouTube'. Kelly is right in that the number of apps, platforms, and devices developed in China for the domestic market has exploded in recent years and many of China's technology firms have products and services that often are faster, of greater variety, and more attractively priced. Not only do those in China feel less need for content from the outside world, China-made technology is in increasing demand across the world with, as the Wall Street Journal reports, a recent model Xiaomi Mi 4 smartphone sold out within 15 second of its release in India (Triggs 2015).

A former hardware engineer, Marie's attitude is typical of such users. For her, so long as her daily life is not affected she remains unperturbed about any state-imposed restrictions and online censorship. Marie reasoned that there were substitute applications (*daiti pin* 代替品) galore available in China to more than answer any gaps in customer needs. However, on contemplating having to deal with restricted access to the internet once she returns to China, Marie admits to worries about being able to access credible research resources. Asked to recall what it was like when she first used the internet in Australia, Marie confides that one of the earliest searches she did was for information on the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Marie's curiosity sprang from the omission of the event in contemporary history within China and she was fairly nonchalant about the treatment meted out to the student protestors. According to her it is important to know about one's national history as it affects the future but Marie feels no necessity to take up the cause of freedom and democracy as an individual. Donna, who hails from the province of Guangdong admits that she adjusts how she uses the internet each time she makes visits to Guangzhou. For her, the Great Firewall makes a significant difference to the content, platforms, and use she has of the internet in China. Yet Donna assures me that unless one has spent considerable time living overseas, the lack is not apparent or overly felt. Belinda maintains that censorship happens outside China, and she uses the metaphor of the family to explain the restrictions. She likens China's stance to that of a family or clan (*jiazu* 家族) and the united front it presents to the outside world as necessary for safeguarding its own interests (*duiwai de shihou yiding yao weihu ziji* 对外的时候一定要维护自己). She further assures me that within the boundaries of the nation a multiple, messy, and less ordered reality is permissible (*ziji zai jiali zenme da nao dou keyi* 自己在家怎么大闹都可以). All three seem to possess what Jiang (2010: 76) describes as 'an unquestioned faith in the Web as a tool against tyranny in the West...Beijing's ability to adapt, and ... a broad public acceptance of the state as a provider of social goods, guarantor of social order, and preserver of public values'.

Tara is one of two among my interlocutors from China who has spent a substantial period of time abroad living in the West before her arrival in Australia. Like Kelly, she was part of the pro-China counter protests sparked by pro-Tibetan protestors during the 2008 Beijing

Olympics torch relay in Western countries. Whereas Kelly took part in Canberra, Tara made her own way to London and Downing Street to defend China against what she deemed unfair Western media coverage of events. Disappointment at the subsequent appropriation of the student-led protests by the Chinese government for domestic political advantage eventually led Tara to disillusionment. Perhaps due to the time she spent in Western Europe, Tara was one of the two exceptions among the interviewees from China who see the online media restrictions as 'unfair'. She scoffs at how blind many in China are to their treatment with 'lives designed by other people and not yourself' and likens it to being treated as a pawn in a chess game. At one point when she protested that people should be free to choose what they view, read, and share in a free country, I reminded her that China is still a socialist country. Vivien, who has settled in Perth with an Australian spouse and three children born in Australia says that much as she now disagrees with the censorship of and restrictions on the internet in China, she still finds it difficult to criticize the Chinese government. In a moment of reflection Vivien traces her reluctance back to the patriotism inculcated as part of her formative education in China (cf. Zhao 1998), which she finds very difficult to overcome.

Vivien's ingrained patriotism and reluctance illustrates well how those from Mainland China have a different symbolic universe to the ethnic Chinese who grew up outside the PRC. Overall there is a consensus among the interlocutors from China that such restrictions and boundaries as exist on the internet in China can be lived with, so long as one is either unaware of them, knows they need only be tolerated for a limited period, or has the ability to work around them. All of them also willingly adjust to the different constraints and freedoms of the different online spaces they inhabit, but that does mean that the disparities are not felt. Marie's search for information on the Tiananmen Massacre and Vivien's reluctant inability to critique censorship in China illustrate an awareness of elements missing from their symbolic universes. Whether these constraints actually impoverish the horizons of information of individuals subject to the restrictions is another issue, but there is no doubt that the PRC internet is differently shaped and, in turn, shapes differently.

There are two forms of nationalism that dominate in China (Zhao 2013: 539). According to Zhao (ibid.), state nationalism has 'no fixed objectified and eternally defined content, nor is it driven by ideology, religious beliefs or other abstract ideas', it serves as 'an instrument of the communist state to bolster the faith of the Chinese people in trouble and hold the country together during the period of rapid and turbulent transformation'. The second form, popular nationalism, began to emerge in the 1900s and is bottom-driven. Popular nationalism thrives online and can lead to anti-foreign demonstrations, for example, against the Japanese in 2005. The central government is aware of its unruly potential and astutely has 'channeled' its strident energies into 'defending China's vital national interests, such as the preservation of national sovereignty and the reunification of China' (ibid.: 541).

At the time when the interviews were taking place, news of China's decision to remove some of the largest US technology firms (Apple, McAfee, Cisco, Intel, and Citrix) from a central government-approved purchase lists had recently emerged (Carsten 2015), so I took the opportunity to ask my interlocutors what they thought of the change in policy. Harry, who works in the Australian IT industry, was optimistic that it would attract returning IT talent back to China to benefit the technological advancement of the nation. Others like Tara, Kelly, Zara, and Belinda were in favor of the move and equated it with the right of a corporation to make decisions that benefitted its own operations over others. At one point of the interview, however, Donna did wonder aloud if the internet in China might become an intranet. The general sentiment was, in Kelly's words, that 'our [China's] internet companies should have our markets'. Belinda uses a historical perspective to explain the new policy. According to her, past efforts to allow the rest of the world into China were made in the hope of technology and knowledge being transferred to local China firms. While the market, in her words, 'had been taken away', technology and knowledge had not been shared. As such, the turnaround and insistence on using China-origin technologies and products for government purchases is fully justified. Kelly describes the decision as a 'win-win' because not only does the policy

allow the government to control the patterns and flows of information in China, it also offers local emergent technology firms some necessary protection against foreign competition.

Donna's reflection about the possible silo effect echoes the fears of China internet watchers (ChinaFile 2015). For them, while not quite an intranet, there is a clear possibility that China's internet could become a self-referential, closed internet (Yong 2012: 29). Such a prospect becomes more of an eventuality each time Beijing argues for a form of 'cyber-sovereignty' that 'holds that national governments should have the right to supervise, regulate, and censor all electronic content transmitted with their borders' (Livingston 2015), or what Jiang (2010: 72) terms 'authoritarian informationalism', which she explains as 'an Internet development and regulatory model that combines elements of capitalism, authoritarianism, and Confucianism'. The gaps between an internet shaped by China (meaning both its users and the Chinese state) and other internets are likely to deepen in the foreseeable future. What the implications are for the Chinese born and raised outside China remains to be seen but a glimpse can be found in the interviews with those of my interlocutors not from China but who nevertheless self-identify as Chinese. The next section uses the interviews with them to understand their experience and use of the internet in Australia and what they think of the idea of the Chinese internet.

## Differently Chinese

Karen was born in Malaysia and is fluent in spoken Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, Malay, Hokkien (Fujianese), and English, but only reads Malay and English. Not surprisingly during the interview we switched between English, Cantonese, and Malay several times in a seamless and fluid fashion common in Malaysia and Singapore. Karen is the only one of those brought up outside China who has visited Mainland China, albeit 15 years ago. Prior to her arrival in Perth in 2013 Karen lived in Yorkshire and Sarawak. As a PR practitioner, Karen is highly competent with social media and, despite not reading Mandarin, uses the instant messaging app Tencent WeChat (in English). Karen confesses to a smidgen of interest in China's culture today but seems to have clearly separated the ways of people from China she has come across from her own strongly articulated and deeply entrenched Chinese-ness. For her, being Chinese revolves around the values of filial piety and a deeply family-oriented approach to life. Asked how she would feel about a Chinese internet filled with what is for her incomprehensible Mandarin text, Karen was initially reticent but finally admitted she would 'feel detached lor' and shut out of what she had always taken to be part of her heritage. Clearly, an individual like Karen would find it hard to be part of the Chinese internet as it is used and produced in China yet Karen maintains that she is Chinese.

Fay grew up in Singapore and sees herself as quite distant from Chinese-ness even though, or perhaps because, she is fluent in a mix of Fujianese and Teochew (another Chinese language) but very seldom speaks Mandarin. She admits to being wary of rendering Chinese-ness into 'too floating a signifier' but cannot quite put her finger on what it means to be Chinese. Asked to indicate how Chinese she rates herself on a scale of 1 to 10, Fay picked a lowly 2 or 3 but nevertheless self-identifies as Chinese. Resident in Perth since 1987, she admits to viewing films and other media programs originating from China today but never without the aid of English subtitles. For Fay, Chinese-ness harks back to a pre-socialist China that her fleeing grandparents brought with them to Singapore where they settled post-Mao. Fay's Chinese-ness is deeply rooted in her Teochew grandparents' customs, food, and speech, which like many of those who left China generations ago had little to do with Mandarin, socialism, or the Communist Party of China. Modern China, the nation where Mandarin dominates and the central government rules, is remote, if not completely alien. Needless to say, Fay does not access the internet in any language other than English, but she gleefully pointed me to the online advertisements in Teochew that the Singapore government put up in 2014 to reach out to the so-called 'pioneer generation' on their healthcare concerns.<sup>2</sup> Would

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<sup>2</sup> See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edk70tCq13A>, last accessed 1 July 2016.

such Teochew content be accepted as part of the Chinese internet? If not, where does it belong?

Both Rachel and Luke are from Malaysia and when asked where home is, they were both unequivocal in that it is Australia. Permanent residents of Australia since the 1990s all three of their children are Australian citizens. Rachel and Luke regard themselves as Malaysian-Chinese and stoutly proclaim they are Malaysian first, then Chinese. However, neither of them use Mandarin to access the internet despite being more fluent in written Mandarin than English. As they explain it, entering Chinese characters via the keyboard is a skill they have yet to learn or, indeed, are at all concerned to pick up. The only occasions where they access Mandarin content online is when family members in Malaysia share the odd snippet of news, gossip or novelty item via mobile phone applications WeChat and WhatsApp. During the interview, geophysicist Luke relates how on a prolonged posting in Indonesia a few years back he spent considerable time online watching China-origin programs on Chinese history, customs, and culture. Prompted to elaborate on his reasons for doing so, Luke explained that he was interested in the customs and literature of Confucius and earlier dynasties and insisted, ‘this is Chinese culture, it has nothing to do with China (or political)’. Rachel uses a similar phrase ‘it’s about their culture’ in reference to similar programs. This indicates that for Rachel as well as Luke, modern China as a political entity or the PRC, is not the source of Chinese culture. Luke is even more adamant that ‘we [Southeast Asian Chinese] preserve customs better [than those] in China’.

To understand such a claim it is important to firstly recognize that diasporic individuals are ‘not only spatially disembedded, “out of place”; they are also temporally disembedded, that is, displaced from the “normal” passing of historical time’ (Ang 2001: 54). Secondly, we should recognize that ‘[d]iasporic individuals, living in cultural borderlands, cling to remembered or imagined homelands; they carry on practicing authentic home cultures, wanting to make sense of the constantly changing subjectivities that stem from their migratory experiences’ (Karanfil 2009: 887). Finally we also need to remember that Luke, Rachel, Karen, and Fay are Southeast Asian Chinese whose parents or grandparents were the original migrants from China to Malaysia and Singapore. Within their symbolic universes, China is even more of a mythical homeland, thrice removed in time, space, *and* experience. The Chinese culture and customs they grew up with come from ‘a mental space frozen in the time of [their forebears’] migrant departure’ (ibid.). Unlike contemporary migrants from China, their homeland is a pre-socialist China that no longer is.

Why then do they continue to identify as Chinese? It is possible to explain these four interlocutors’ staunch Chinese-ness as a residual backlash of the historical suspicion with which Chinese sojourners’ loyalty were viewed by newly formed nations such as Malaysia and Indonesia in post-WWII Southeast Asia (SarDesai 2003: 298-307). The fact that the people of these same nations remain locked into racialized categories of enumeration and administration such as Chinese, Malay, Indians, and Others today is the other reason why ethnicity remains an entrenched part of being Southeast Asians.

What do the interviewees from China make of the above distinctions between the Chinese from China and those from other parts of Asia? Kelly, who hails from the Western part of China, remarks half in jest that, ‘Chinese is a serious culture’ and proceeds to detail how impossible it is to speak to Southeast Asian Chinese about serious matters like politics as they interact with others on a much more personal and trivial level. Tara elaborates that she is often able to pick out if an individual is from Mainland China (*guonei* 国内) or not from their ‘language systems’. By way of a simple example, she cites the difference in tone between a Mainland Chinese and a Taiwanese woman making a verbal request for help. For Tara, Mainlanders are direct and less concerned about the mannerisms and courtesies that adorn the speech of Taiwanese. She asserts that the education systems, cultures, views, and attitudes between the Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese are ‘completely different’.

In an effort to understand how media practices and histories contribute to a distinctive Chinese internet as per Yang's (2012) claims, I also asked the interviewees if, and how, they access media from China. On the whole, those from China tend to access such media online either via YouTube or one of the myriad online video sites such as LeTV and PPTV, using their laptops, streaming set-top boxes, and, in one case, a satellite dish. The four interviewees not from China indicated that they simply rely on what is broadcast on free-to-air television in Australia. None deliberately seek out media from China. Different media practices seem to separate the two groups but it remains to be ascertained if length of stay or age could be the cause of the marked difference between methods of access.

What gradually emerged from these conversations was a perception common across all the interlocutors of a cultural gap between the Chinese brought up in China and those who were born and have lived outside China. The reasons behind the gap are difficult to pin down even if my interlocutors tried valiantly to describe it in turn as a cultural distance, a diversity of approaches to values and even as differences in speech patterns and mannerisms. Perhaps the most telling observation comes courtesy of Tara, who astutely remarks that while being Chinese could be thought of as an issue of nationality, for some it is a state of mind. Though mostly tacit and seldom expressed out loud, the interviewees and their responses indicate that for all twelve participants an enduring gulf exists between PRC culture and a broader, older Chinese culture that goes a lot deeper than geography or nationality and cuts through to individual identity (both claimed and ascribed), behavior, and life choices. For the interviewees from Malaysia and Singapore, there is also an obvious if poorly defined separation between political China and cultural China.

Despite the hype, there is no such thing as a 'global Chinese'. Even as a marker of identity, 'Chinese-ness' is increasingly centered on understandings emerging from China exerting ideological and emotion power on what it means to be Chinese discursively and socially (Ang 2001: 84). The influence of China on what Fortier calls the 'migration imaginari[ies]' i.e. social imaginaries that shape and are shaped by 'public cultures of assumption, disposition, and actions' of the many Chinese diasporas is already considerable (Gregory, cited in Fortier 2012: 31) but contemporary China's way is not the only way of being Chinese. It is not the intention here to argue for a revival of Tu Wei-Ming's thesis on cultural China and challenge the authority of China as the motherland or position the diasporic periphery as the centre of the Chinese world (Tu 2005). However, if a 'residual Chineseness' visible to others and ascribed to oneself stubbornly remains no matter how one might disavow it (Ang 2013: 29), then there needs to be room on the internet to be differently Chinese. The first step towards such accommodation is to not equate the Chinese internet with the internet in China.

## **Conclusion**

I began this paper with a view to understanding if the distinctions between the various Chinese diasporas also matter online. My argument is that they do, and not just because lumping all Chinese diasporas into one would be homogenizing; but also because the internet as experienced in specific locations under certain conditions and media practices is basically different. To whom do these differences between a Chinese internet and a PRC internet matter? There are several answers to the question. Firstly, it is obvious national governments have been at pains to erect national boundaries on the internet. Aside from China, Singapore, Iran, and increasingly Malaysia are also trying to police what their people can access online and when.

Additionally, as the interviews attest, these differences matter also to Chinese users of the internet. Whether expanded or restricted, accessed in Mandarin, English, Cantonese, or Fujianese, at greater speeds, blocked, or censored, all these characteristics go to forming user experiences of the internet. Glossing over the very real if tacit distinctions within the Chinese diasporas also allows PRC to dominate how Chinese overseas are regarded and too frequently treated in their various sites of settlement. In a century predicted to be Asia's very own, the

stakes are high. For the ethnic Chinese of countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia there is much to be gained from re-sinicization. However, as the histories of the Chinese in Indonesia demonstrated as recently as the 1990s, there is also much at risk (Tay 2006). Anti-Chinese populist sentiment lies dormant in Southeast Asia today but such antagonism has a 'long and deep-seated history, going back to colonialism's divide and rule policies (Ang 2001: 63), which is all too easily roused.

Diligent delineation is even more crucial as the internet's appeal as a global socio-political space grows side by side with the increased mobility of individuals across national borders. The seemingly natural and given association of Chinese-ness with the PRC and the understanding of Chinese-ness as a quality coterminous with the ability to read, write, and/or speak its dominant language, i.e. Mandarin, needs to be contested. Yes, being Chinese is a 'fluid, sometimes imposed, and often challenged notion' (Sullivan & Chen 2015: 269). Yes, internet users from China constitute the largest group on the internet today, so their interactions, preferences, information, and practices have spread to many parts of the internet and occupy the top spot in league tables. All this argues is that it is important for scholars of the internet to take care that China's online dominance does not obscure the heterogeneity of multiple Chinese minorities who all have some claim to the broad category of Chinese-ness and whose experiences, use, and expectations of the internet are different to those from China. Contrary to claims of a Sinophone internet, the lived distinctions between the various Chinese languages and symbolic universes extend online and mean there is no one Chinese internet but several of which the PRC internet is but one. Admittedly, the number of interviews here is not large so such conclusions can be further explored.

Still, at the risk of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2003) and the ultimate nationalism of the diasporic discourse (Ang 2013: 24), I maintain that communities of internet users should be studied within their context of practice. For as Goggin (2012: 356) argues and this paper recognizes, there are many different internets that arise out of:

the specific development of infrastructures in different countries, but...also to do with a range of policies and market structures, and crucially to do with linguistic and cultural factors. There are very different histories of media that shape the adoption and indeed 'invention' of the Internet in particular places.

To do so is to approach research from a 'methodological cosmopolitanism' perspective (Beck & Sznaider 2010: 393-4) that is 'sensitive and open to the many universalisms, the conflicting contextual universalisms' and, importantly, replaces 'the dualism of the modern and the traditional' to point to and create 'the image of a de-territorialized melange of conflicting contextual modernities in their economic, cultural and political dimensions' of 'entangled modernities'.

Considering the checkered influences that have played a part in the construction of Asia, to see Asian modernities as entangled is no more than apt. As the people and cultures of Asia crisscross the world in their sojourns, to and from the continent, for shorter and longer periods of time, these entanglements can only become more knotted and complex. As I have argued elsewhere (Leong 2016), the example of the PRC business migrants in Western Australia demonstrates that even when nationals from one country move to another country, some of the cultural and media practices and expectations of old continue to inflect how they use and shape their understanding of the internet within the new setting. Migrants do not shed habits, ideas, and practices of media use on crossing borders, and these customs and patterns of use continue to inflect how they understand the world around them. One way to study the interplay and transitions between older and newer media practices and expectations and stay aware of the nuanced distinctions between the various generations of internet users is to conduct interdisciplinary, multi-sited comparative research. How might a more specific project related to the question of the many Chinese internets be set up?

In his survey of Asian mobile communication research – understood as a ‘multidisciplinary endeavor to comprehend issues related to mobile communication in Asia and among Asian populations around the world’, Qiu (2010: 213) argues for an approach similar to Georgiou’s (2003). He suggests that rather than framing such studies in the national or global context, Asia should be used as a ‘framework of reference’ (ibid.: 221). Qiu advocates for ‘cross-boundary debates [that take place] across scholarly traditions and perspectives, across the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis, [where] the results of such exchange can help enhance our understanding of technology and social transformation in Asia and beyond’ (ibid.: 224). In so doing, he echoes the urgings of Chen (2010: 255), who distinguishes between China as method and Asia as method. This, for Chen, is a crucial ‘choice of emphasis’ whose ‘core and political agenda is to transform our subjectivities’ (ibid.). For both, such a practice would entail not just multiplying the sites, disciplines, and approaches of research but also the sources of our readings. This is a tall order for any project and must by virtue of its very scope demand a team of multi-lingual, interdisciplinary mobile researchers dispersed across various locations. What form would such a project take and what kind of questions would it seek to answer using which methods? Georgiou’s (2003) work on the project *Diasporic Media in the UK: A Mapping* provides an example of how such a multi-perspective, multi-sited, and interdisciplinary approach might be used effectively. By focusing on the local, the national, and the transnational as ‘the three spatial and cultural contexts where the experience of diasporic groups evolve’ (ibid.: 5), the research team devised and made meaningful comparisons across a number of case studies.

Taking a leaf from Georgiou, Qiu, and Chen, one can imagine a Cantonese study of instant messaging apps such as WeChat and Whatsapp based on case studies of Cantonese-speaking communities in the cities of Guangzhou, Macau, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Vancouver, and Sydney. The methods used for such a project could comprise a mixed methods combination of traditional and digitized methods that fill out the queries that literature reviews begin with surveys, focus groups, and interviews that search for understandings grounded in practices and lived experiences. What kind of questions would such a study ask? To begin with, do individuals who speak and understand Chinese languages but not know how to write Cantonese use such apps? If so, what are the social and technological affordances that facilitate such practices? Also, what are the factors from the cultural and the political to the economic that give rise to these practices? Such a study must take into account how each of the local case studies are circumscribed and assisted by the national regulatory, infrastructural contexts within which these internet practices occur. One way to triangulate the local and national with the transnational in such a study would be to trace the migration trajectories post the 1997 handover of Hong Kong and make meaningful comparisons across the cases of communities in Vancouver and Sydney.

Framing such projects are in these times of shrinking research funding sources, with the notable exceptions of that emanating from China and Singapore, close to an exercise in wishful thinking. Even so, it remains important to eschew China as method for Asia as method because however large and complex China’s internet communities are, to use China as the frame of reference is to risk the tacit infiltration of an insular subjectivity. The argument made here – that the lived distinctions between the various Chinese languages and their attendant symbolic universes extend online and must be recognised so that the PRC internet is understood as no more than one of many internets – seeks to advance against exactly such parochial subjectivity.

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