

From Southern Seas to Cyberspace: Chinese Diaspora Websites in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific

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Introduction*

The noun *diaspora* (“the scattered ones”) aptly characterises the dispersal of Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific. In the year 2000, more than 34 million Chinese were living in 140 countries outside Mainland China and Taiwan. Reflecting long-term historical trends, 80 percent of them still resided in Southeast Asia. Although Chinese are scattered across the planet, those outside the mainland cluster together and form a variety of communication networks. Indeed, “the study of the Overseas Chinese has by now become a global enterprise, raising new theoretical problems and empirical challenges.”¹ The online presence of Chinese in China² and of Overseas or diasporic Chinese has become an important cultural, historical and political fact potentially involving large numbers of people in most countries. Some of these diasporic Chinese have created websites and other means of online communication like e-mail networks, bulletin boards, chat rooms and blogs.

This research note begins with the online presence of Chinese diaspora before considering the themes that characterise diasporic websites. It starts by summarising and analysing the Southern Seas subset of twenty-seven websites taken from an experts’ sample of one hundred and ten websites concerning Chinese diaspora. Initiated by the author in May 2003, this database is the Chinese Cultures Abroad WWW Virtual Library <<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~pollard/chculture.html>>. It is now an official module of the China WWW Virtual Library and the Asian Studies WWW Virtual Library.

It is worth noting at the start that, unlike English, in Chinese language there are at least three overlapping terms that may refer to the Chinese diaspora. In *Putonghua* or Mandarin, *Huárén* means “ethnic Chinese”. In contradistinction, *Huáqiáo* means “Overseas Chinese”. This has the connotation of Chinese *citizens* who happen to live outside China. Several websites evaluated in the Directory fall into this category. Finally, *Huayi* means “people of Chinese descent”. The English phrase *Chinese diaspora* sometimes bridges several of those meanings, and if it sometimes seems politically more neutral, it nonetheless still carries the etymologically passive Greek baggage of having been “scattered”.

Online presence of Chinese diaspora

Construction of the database. The “Chinese Cultures Abroad WWW Virtual Library” was first initiated by the author as the Chinese Cultures Abroad Directory in May 2003. It is an online library that links, documents, annotates, and evaluates a steadily growing number of websites. By 2007, this number had reached one hundred and ten. Most of

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¹ Charney, Yeoh and Tong 2003:xix.

² Damm and Thomas 2006.

the websites are managed by Chinese in Asia, the Pacific, the Americas, Europe and Africa or, if not managed by Chinese, they highlight the impact of Chinese diaspora history and cultures in these regions. The present data paper focuses on twenty- of these websites: twenty-one concerned with Southeast Asia, three with the South Pacific and one with both of these regions. The title of each website and its URL are listed in the appendixes.

Websites and other networked media. Many websites are more accessible than chat rooms and text messaging, for example, with pass-worded web pages the exception. Although the html coding for websites is easily modified by the webmaster, websites are less ephemeral than some networked digital communications media. For example, they are easier to access over time than the digital output from chat rooms or text messaging. Websites are more visible to students, faculty, other researchers, and members of various “cyber publics” curious to learn more about Chinese communities outside China. Even so, chat rooms are among the panoply of resources hosted on some Chinese diaspora websites.³

Archival preservation. Future-oriented university librarians have been warning scholars about proven and likely fragilities of digital formats. Thus far, the open-source, text-based World Wide Web has been more durable than some other digital formats. Even so, websites have disappeared from their original web server after being documented and annotated in the Chinese Cultures Abroad database. Whenever an archival version of a missing website is discovered on the Internet Wayback Machine,⁴ the archival URL is supplied so as to maintain access to the online heritage of the Chinese diaspora.⁵ In the three years since the database began, only one website appears to have disappeared irrevocably.⁶

The international language, English, is most widely used in Nanyang Chinese diaspora websites. The international character of English as a first, second, third, or even fourth language may make these websites more usable reference sources for beginning, intermediate and advanced Internet researchers.

Validity. Does this approach to database construction insure that Chinese diaspora websites are being included, counted, and evaluated? What are the threats to validity?

If the minimum financial investment for a computer, Internet connection and basic skill set are not available to all diasporic Chinese, does unequal access to the Internet distort perceptions of Chinese diaspora?⁷ Loong Wong for one would agree. His summary of cultural theorists in a recent article states that “the Internet . . . privileges essentialism and communal hegemony.” In the conclusion, Wong asserts:

Cybercommunities have enable[d] people to participate in a form of belonging with others which may not require that we all feel as one or that we have a common origin or only speak the same language but that there is a network of relations found between the self and others which can be and are held together through shared exchanges. These relationships are never total but indeterminate and slippery, and often simultaneously local and global. Because of this import, there is a need to critically engage in the debates surrounding culture, cyber-identities, diasporic identities and long-distance nationalism. A

³ For example, Chinese diaspora website SEA-1.

⁴ Internet Wayback Machine 1996-2006.

⁵ Chinese diaspora websites SEA-11, and SEA-13 are archival copies.

⁶ Despite several searches, private consultations and public appeals to the 3,500-member online H-ASIA community, no archival URL has been reported for Chinese diaspora website SEA-12.

⁷ Ciolek 2003a.

failure to do so may result in it being captive of a homogenising, transnational elite discourse sponsored by global capitalism.⁸

Wong's insights are a potentially useful hermeneutic. However, they first should be modified to acknowledge that the global capitalist class has not yet been able to control every thought, impulse and expression on the Internet.

Replicability. The entire database for the Chinese Cultures Abroad WWW Virtual Library <<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~pollard/chculture.html>> is online. It is not pass-worded, and its top-level text and source code are accessible to any scholar with an Internet connection. Hosted on a University of Hawaii web server, the Chinese Cultures Abroad WWW Virtual Library has officially been part of the China WWW Virtual Library⁹ and the Asian Studies WWW Virtual Library since December 2003.¹⁰ These affiliations enhance access and replicability.

Overview of database. Documentation for each annotated Chinese diaspora website includes the following information, if known: 1) title, theme; 2) uniform resource locator (URL); 3) content manager or other organisational officer; 4) primary audience; 5) unique features; 6) language or languages; 7) ethnicity of members; 8) navigability; 9) phone, fax, e-mail, snail mail address of webmaster or other officer; 10) dates created, updated, accessed; and 11) evaluator. In each entry, documentation is arranged on the left side while annotations and evaluations are on the right.

Languages of choice. Table 1, below, summarizes linguistic patterns, variability, and clustering on Southern Seas Chinese diaspora websites.

Table 1: Language frequencies in Southern Seas Chinese diaspora websites, 2003-2006

<i>Language</i>	<u>Range, concentration of languages</u>		
	Monolingual ^a	Bilingual ^b	Total ^b
English	4	13	20
Chinese	2	5	7
Bahasa	4	6	10
Filipino/Tagalog	-	1	1
Japanese	-	1	1
Totals	10	26	39

Notes:

a. Totals in each row indicate the combined number of Chinese diaspora websites—monolingual or bilingual—using the language in the far left column. Accordingly, Chinese is used on 6 websites in the database.

b. Each language used in bilingual websites is counted once above. Thus, total language/website appearances (39) exceed the number of websites (27) in the database since bilingual websites are counted once for each language each.

⁸ Wong 2003.

⁹ <<http://www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/igcs/>>.

¹⁰ <<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/WWWVL-AsianStudies.html>>.

The minority of diaspora websites that use only Chinese deserve attention. For example, the Chinese-language *Overseas Chinese Daily News* on the island of Borneo in Sabah, Malaysia,¹¹ focuses heavily on local news and information useful to local Chinese, as do two others outside the Southern Seas cohort of websites documented in the database.¹²

Domain names. "A domain name locates an organisation or other entity on the Internet."¹³ However, domain name information currently tells us less about Chinese diaspora websites than it might have done during the mid-1990s. Table 2 summarises the array of non-geographic domain names in order of frequency in the database.

Table 2: Southern Seas subset – Classification by Internet non-geographic domain name

Internet domain	.co .com	.or .org	.ac .edu	.go .gov	.net	others	Total
N =	13	7	3	2	1	1	27

Note:

Two of these Chinese diaspora websites are no longer accessible under their original URLs. Although one of these is now archived at <http://web.archive.org>, for present purposes, the original domain is counted above.

Commercial and organisational top-level domain names lead the pack with a combined total of twenty (74 percent) or about three-fourths of the total in Table 2 above. The expansion of domain names in recent years sometimes conceals sponsorship and can defy efforts at classification. Similarly, some .ac and .edu websites are institutionally sponsored¹⁴ while others are personal projects of students.¹⁵ Conversely, personal websites may be vehicles for political perspectives.

Moving east from Asia, non-U.S. top-level *geographic* domain names for Southern Seas Chinese diaspora websites in the database include .jp (Japan), .my (Malaysia), .sg (Singapore), .ph (Philippines), .id (Indonesia), .au (Australia), .nz (New Zealand), and at (Austria). However, the proliferation of functional and personalized domain names in recent years suggests caution against overdrawing fine comparisons with these criteria. More useful for some types of classification than domain names are institutional affiliations and street addresses of webmasters and content managers.

For virtually every website in the database, the name and location of the editor, content manager and/or webmaster are known, even if the location of the web server is not known. Are the webmasters and sponsoring organisations of Chinese diaspora websites located in the country or region on which these websites are focused? That question is answered in Table 3.

¹¹ Chinese diaspora website SEA-14. See also Chinese diaspora website SEA-22.

¹² 王丽 Wang Li 2006.

¹³ Web Services 2001-2006.

¹⁴ Chinese diaspora websites SEA-5 and AP-1.

¹⁵ Chinese diaspora website SEA-17.

Table 3: Location of Chinese diaspora website sponsors

Website's geographic focus on diaspora	Residence of website's content manager or sponsoring institution							
	PRC, HK	SE Asia	Japan	South Pacific	Asia Pacific	USA	Europe	Total
SE Asia	1	16	1	-	-	3	1	22
South Pacific	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	4
Asia Pacific	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Totals	1	16	1	4	1	3	1	27

Note:

Two Chinese diaspora websites have sponsoring institutional addresses in two countries. Tsinoy on the Web (Chinese diaspora website SEA-1) has institutional addresses in the Philippines and the United States. And the Indonesian Business Association in Shanghai (Chinese diaspora website SEA-20) has addresses in Indonesia and the PRC. Each of these websites was assigned to the country or region of its first institutional address.

Chinese Diaspora Website Themes

If unequal access to Internet resources may sometimes distort perceptions of Chinese diaspora, the experts' sample of websites used for this research note certainly reflects identifiable impulses known from traditional Chinese networking. Issues highlighted in this sample approach the range of concerns affecting Chinese diaspora on the Internet: they reflect Chinese values regarding youth, women and the clan or family; social services; anti-discrimination struggles and other political advocacy; newspapers and television stations; preservation of community traditions and history;¹⁶ business networking and professional associations; as well as philosophy, religion, health, self-cultivation and the fine arts. These themes will be discussed later. Two entries (8 percent) are web pages from websites with purposes broader than Chinese diaspora.¹⁷ Details aside, maintaining or claiming Chinese identity of some sort is a common underlying theme.

As expected, university libraries¹⁸ and centres around the world sponsor significant Chinese diaspora websites. Others also focus heavily on the global history of the Chinese diaspora or at least on Chinese diaspora in one country or region. Diaspora websites for business and professional associations are note-worthy in Southeast Asia.¹⁹ And Chinese diaspora pages on more broadly focused websites of successful diasporic Chinese business and professional people²⁰ reflect yet another kind of sponsor. Finally, media organisations that have ventured onto the World Wide Web from their concurrent forms as hard-copy newspapers²¹ round out this category of Chinese diaspora websites.

Other website themes include venues featuring lion dancing.²² Although overlapping in content, many websites categorised here are not mutually exclusive. For example, Chinese diasporic youth is a focus of websites whose ostensible purpose is

¹⁶ Websites of university departments of Chinese language teaching are *not* included in the database. Neither are university centers for Chinese studies unless they also focus on Chinese diaspora.

¹⁷ Chinese diaspora websites SEA-5 and AP-1.

¹⁸ Chinese diaspora websites SEA-5, and AP-1.

¹⁹ Chinese diaspora websites SEA-6 and SEA-20.

²⁰ Chinese diaspora website SP-2.

²¹ Chinese diaspora websites SEA-2 and SEA-14.

²² Chinese diaspora website SP-3.

broader, for example, sports, martial arts, or dance. A Chinese Christian church²³ provides another other outlet for Chinese diaspora outreach on the Internet.

For Southeast Asia, some Chinese diaspora websites explicit reflect and affirm local Chinese communities' willingness to resist overt anti-Chinese racism. Campaigns and struggles against discrimination in countries like Indonesia have helped to break down the stereotype of the apolitical Chinese immigrant. In postcolonial Indonesia, "nationalist xenophobia" has been "directed against diaspora Chinese in times of crisis". In 1998, for example, high-ranking officers of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia trained, armed, and encouraged terrorist mobs that raped, mutilated and murdered Chinese during the agonising final months of General Suharto's dictatorship. As a result, "more than 1,200 Chinese were killed in anti-Chinese urban riots in May 1998".²⁴ Digital vandalism marring the "Shrine of Remembrance: Sexual Violence against Chinese-Indonesian Females" website²⁵ suggests that exposure of racist atrocities committed against Chinese in Indonesia irritated the perpetrators or their sympathisers.

Final Reflections.

With the support of colleagues, administrators, students, and two small grants, considerable effort has been invested in constructing the Chinese Cultures Abroad WWW Virtual Library. Although English is most used in Chinese diaspora websites, their linguistic diversity—with ten additional Asian or European languages—is salient. The construction of this database is an important contribution to the sociology and politics of Chinese diaspora. Six months after having been launched on the Internet, the Chinese Cultures Abroad Directory was evaluated as a website "of long-term use/value to research and scholarly endeavours" and rated "Essential" by *The Asian Studies WWW Monitor: Electronic Journal*.²⁶

As already quoted above from an article in a University of Illinois-Chicago online journal, Loong Wong (2003) is concerned that the Internet may somehow misrepresent the life of diasporic Chinese. Although this is a legitimate concern, a more researchable question is how accurately do Chinese diaspora websites represent the organisations sponsoring them? Answering this question would deepen our understanding of the sociology of Chinese diaspora on the Internet.

This early research suggests opportunities for future study of Chinese diaspora websites. For example, in-depth interviews with webmasters and content managers might determine the number of hits to these websites and the number of other websites linking to them. Also it might be useful to know whether webmasters or content managers have any anecdotal or systematic sense of the perceptions that Chinese diaspora and other individuals and communities have of them. Do any content managers or sponsoring institutions and organisations engage in regular self-evaluation? How do local organisations, journalists, students and other use the resources offered by their websites? Such interviews would elaborate and articulate an even richer picture of the impact and reception of these websites in the communities they aspire to represent on the Internet. Finally, it would be useful to know if overtly political Chinese diaspora websites have experienced DNS ("denial-of-service") attacks or other forms of cyber warfare, assuming webmasters would even admit to having been targeted in this fashion.

²³ Chinese diaspora website SEA-21.

²⁴ Nonini 2001:260-261, fn. 1. These horrible events are graphically documented by five Chinese diaspora websites whose focus is not exclusively on the Southern Seas: Chinese diaspora websites Trans-10, Trans-11, Trans-12, Trans-13, and Trans-14.

²⁵ Chinese diaspora website SEA-12.

²⁶ Ciolek 2003b.

The rise of China has increasingly entered discussions of East Asian and world politics. In these discussions, China's soft power surely includes its global cultural capital.²⁷ But which China does one have in mind? Phrasing the question in this manner is useful. After all, whether this soft power represents the global cultural capital of China's government, Chinese society or Chinese civilisation is an open question. To that extent, it remains to be seen how much Chinese diaspora websites in non-Chinese languages will contribute to China's future "international authority"²⁸ and thereby to its global cultural capital. The Nanyang and other Chinese diaspora websites provide a window into that discussion.

²⁷ People's Daily Staff 2006.

²⁸ Lake 2006:29.

Appendix 1

Southeast Asia (22 websites)

- SEA-1. Tsinoy on the Web
<http://www.tsinoy.com/>
- SEA-2. Chinese Commercial News
<http://www.siongpo.com/>
- SEA-3. KAISA—Angelo King Heritage Center
http://www.philonline.com.ph/~kaisa/khc_btsinoy.html
- SEA-4. Malaysian Chinese Association
<http://www.mca.org.my/>
- SEA-5. Chinese in Malaysia
<http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar/data/malchi.htm>
- SEA-6. Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry
<http://english.sccci.org.sg/>
- SEA-7. Chinese Heritage Centre
<http://www.chineseheritagecentre.org/>
- SEA-8. Japan Center for Asian Historical Records
http://www.jacar.go.jp/asia_en/index_en.html
- SEA-9. United Nations Association USA is concerned about Human Rights Abuse in Indonesia
http://www.huaren.com/Indo/Human_Rights.html
- SEA-10. Indonesian Huaren Crisis Center
<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/4120/>
- SEA-11. Shrine of Remembrance: Sexual Violence against Chinese-Indonesian Females
<http://land.heim.at/podersdorf/220272/links.html>
http://web.archive.org/web/*http://land.heim.at/podersdorf/220272/
- SEA-12. Protect the Chinese Women's Right! No More Sexual Violence Against Chinese Women!
http://www.geocities.com/karenw_hk/chinese_women.html
- SEA-13. Indo Chaos
<http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/3233/chaos.html>
<http://web.archive.org/web/20000520025533/http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/3233/chaos.html>
- SEA-14. Overseas Chinese Daily News
<http://www.founder.net.my/ocdn/>

- SEA-15. Forum Budaya Tionghoa dan Sejarah Tiongkok
(*Chinese Indonesian Cultural Forum and History of China*)
<http://www.budaya-tionghoa.org/>
- SEA-16. Perhimpunan Indonesia Tionghoa (INTI)
(*Chinese Indonesian Association*)
<http://www.inti.or.id/>
- SEA-17. Singkawang, Kota Seribu Kuil
(*Singkawang City of a Thousand Temples*)
<http://students.ukdw.ac.id/~22033360/>
- SEA-18. Perwakilan Umat Buddha Indonesia or Walubi
(*Representative of Buddhists in Indonesia*)
<http://www.walubi.or.id/>
- SEA-19. Mualaf Center Online
(*Union of Chinese Indonesian Muslims*)
<http://mualaf.com/>
- SEA-20. Indonesian Business Association in Shanghai
<http://harsono.com/links.html>
- SEA-21. Renshi Hanyu Online by Lembaga Pendidikan Bahasa Tionghoa PPSA
(*PPSA Chinese Language Education Institution*)
<http://www.ppsatop.com/PPSA.html>
- SEA-22. World News.
<http://www.worldnews.ph.com/>

Appendix 2

Asia/Pacific (1 or more countries in each region)
n = 1

- AP-1. Centre for the Study of Chinese Southern Diaspora²⁹
<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/cscsd/>

Appendix 3

South Pacific (Australia, New Zealand)
n = 4

- SP-1. Chinese Professionals Club of Australia³⁰
<http://www.cPCA.org.au/member.asp>

²⁹ In the main part of the paper above, Chinese diaspora websites from the "Asia-Pacific" section are footnoted as "AP- plus the website's number from this appendix.

³⁰ In the main part of the above, Chinese diaspora websites from the "South Pacific" section are footnoted as "SP-" plus the website's number from this appendix.

- SP-2. The Chinese in New Zealand
<http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/>
- SP-3. Shaolin Chow Ka Kung Fu, Chinese Lion Dance and Chi Kung (Qigong)
<http://www.shaolinchowka.com/shaolin-kung-fu-gallery/>
- SP-4. Resources on Australian Chinese and Chinese Studies in Australia.
<http://www.nla.gov.au/asian/lang/cis.html#AustraliaChin>

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