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**Diaspora, Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism:  
Overseas Chinese and Neo-Nationalism  
in China and Thailand**

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# DIASPORA, COSMOPOLITANISM AND NATIONALISM: OVERSEAS CHINESE AND NEO-NATIONALISM IN CHINA AND THAILAND<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This essay highlights the dynamic interaction between Chinese, Thai and Sino-Thai identity construction, on the one hand, and the mutual production of domestic and international politics, on the other. It questions how nationalism and cosmopolitanism are formulated by arguing against the popular notion that a diaspora is a cosmopolitan community situated in a foreign nation. Diasporic public spheres are critically examined to show how Sino-Thai identity is produced in relation first to neo-nationalism in Thailand and China, and second in specific contexts within Thailand which call into question essential notions of Thai, Chinese and overseas Chinese identity. Diasporas thus both construct and deconstruct the seemingly opposing forces of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. The essay uses an ethnographic approach to move beyond sociological approaches which focus on national identity, norms and formal institutions. Rather than looking to culture as a substance, the essay highlights how culture takes shape in context-sensitive relations between identity and difference. It adds the often neglected empirical element to debates about social constructivism and identity.

It is now common to see globalisation as the spread of a homogeneous political economy, which challenges the legitimacy and efficacy of the nation-state. This political economy is attended by a cultural dominance characterised as Westernisation or Americanisation. But resistance to such globalisation is not limited to a reassertion of the boundaries of the nation-state or protest actions by cosmopolitan social movements. Another group of texts points to diasporic Chinese networks as an authentically Asian form of globalisation. The Chinese diaspora is said to have its own highly successful 'culture of capitalism.' Hence rather than pointing to a global political economy, many now talk of a distinct Chinese modernity which has its own unique economic-culture.<sup>2</sup>

Though diaspora are hailed as post-national groups who challenge both state sovereignty and global capitalism (Appadurai 1996: 19-21, 165), overseas Chinese identity itself has been radically unstable for the past 150 years.

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<sup>2</sup> There is a range of such material. See Bolt (2000); Clegg, et al. (1990); Tu (1994 and 1996); Berger (1988); Redding (1996); Naisbitt (1996); and Ong (1999).

Beyond simple hyphenations like Sino-Thai and Chinese-American, the diaspora was called 'domestic overseas Chinese' in imperial China, 'foreign Orientals' in the Dutch East Indies, 'artificial Chinese' and 'noble-ised Chinese' in Thailand, and since the 1980s 'pseudo-Chinese' in the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>3</sup> Though the overseas Chinese network is seen as an 'invisible empire' which 'knows no borders' (Seagrave 1995; Tanzer 1994), this essay will look to the Sino-Thai experience to see how diasporic Chinese have been involved in defining borders: provincial, national, and transnational. In this way, it will highlight how domestic and international politics are mutually constructed.

Most research on Sino-Thai identity, like diaspora research in general, begins and ends with a comparative examination of Chineseness and Thai-ness. The two national cultures are related according to the distinction of assimilation/multiculturalism to ask whether the essential 'Chinese identity' has been assimilated into Thai culture – or not. Thus diasporic Chinese are studied as an 'ethnic problem' in the new states of postcolonial Southeast Asia; like many Jewish communities in Europe they have been criticised as a pariah entrepreneur group who profited from European imperial regimes. Politics is thus reduced to questions of the loyalty of these 'essential outsiders' to their Chinese homeland or their adopted nation. Sino-Thai history thus is not autonomous, but is absorbed into the national historiography of either China or Thailand (Chirot and Reid 1997; Skinner 1957; Kasian 1992; Cao 1999: 3; and McKeown 1999: 312).

Critical studies of diaspora seek to question the assimilation/multiculturalism distinction by arguing that cosmopolitan ethnic communities should not be defined by either countries of origin or host countries. Nonini and Ong, for example, argue that diasporic Chinese have their own 'third culture' which is neither purely Chinese nor essentially Thai, but mobile: 'different ways of being Chinese are not based on the possession of reified Chinese culture, but on the propensity to seek opportunities elsewhere' (Nonini and Ong 1997: 11, 26).<sup>4</sup> This critical examination of diaspora and cosmopolitanism has highlighted the intimate and specific linkages between the global and the local as well as the interplay of gender, class and ethnicity (Clifford 1994; Cheah and Robbins 1998; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996; Liu 1998: 607; Bao 1998; and Chan and Tong 2001: 6). As Wang Gungwu – the dean of overseas Chinese studies – argues, the diaspora is no longer tied to China, but is engaged in a 'quest for autonomy' (Wang 2000).

But the response of diasporic Chinese to the rape and murder of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia in 1998 makes us question such a clear distinction between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Many of the diasporic Chinese websites that now serve as networks for a cosmopolitan community – for example, the World

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<sup>3</sup> See Wang (1992: 1-10 and 1991); Reid (1997: 33); Anderson (1991: 122-3); and Kasian (1992: 108). The more common terms for this group 'overseas Chinese' and 'diasporic Chinese' are also problematic (see Wang 1999). Unless otherwise noted, in this essay I will use them interchangeably to refer to ethnic Chinese populations who reside outside of the PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

<sup>4</sup> Also see Ong (1999: 12-4) and Chan and Tong (2001: 5-7).

Huaren [Chinese] Federation's [www.Huaren.org](http://www.Huaren.org) – were initially organised as a response to the Indonesian anti-Chinese atrocities. These diasporic cyber-networks also interacted with mainland Chinese cyber bulletin boards to pressure the Chinese government in Beijing to respond more forcefully to these events (see Arnold 1998; Hughes 2000: 205-6). Hence cosmopolitan networks are here used for nationalist issues, in an interplay of influence: while elite diasporic cosmopolitans (in Southeast Asia, Australia and North America) were providing information to pressure the Chinese state, elite mainland Chinese nationals were pressuring the same government in support of diasporic Chinese (in Indonesia). Rather than global civil society, which uses universal rights to argue for justice, these groups spoke in terms of Chinese ethnicity in a diasporic public sphere. Thus cosmopolitanism, nationalism and diaspora are mutually produced first in cyberspace and then in government pronouncements – cyber-campaigns from both inside and outside the PRC pushed Beijing to depart from its policy of diplomatic non-interference to condemn the Indonesian government.

In this essay, I will argue that such examples show how essentialised notions of identity – either for nation-states or for diaspora as an autonomous third culture – are not helpful in explaining transnational politics. I will question how nationalism and cosmopolitanism are formulated by arguing against the increasingly popular notion of diasporic Chinese as a post-national cosmopolitan community of 'transnational yuppies' who are constantly in motion (Ong 1999: 19, 24, 110-36, 175). Instead of searching for the true Sino-Thai 'third culture' in relation to some stable notion of Thai-ness and Chineseness, this essay will show how diaspora both constructs and deconstructs the seemingly opposing forces of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Though diasporic Chinese capitalism is often figured as a peculiarly Asian form of globalisation, which erodes national borders in Southeast Asia, I will argue that diasporic Chinese populations are intimately involved in defining borders as well as calling them into question. To achieve this, the essay will not merely deconstruct the nation or the cosmopolitan, but show how diaspora is necessary for the mutual production of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Thus it will add to critical notions of diaspora by putting the nation back into the local/global dynamic.

To understand the transnational politics of diaspora, we need to move beyond sociological approaches to international politics, which focus on national identity, norms and formal institutions. Examining the politics of diaspora is helpful for they are often seen as 'social problems' by states because they do not fit in homogeneous notions of territory and identity. While 'Nationalism involves fixing fluid identities, refashioning their representations, and rigidifying the perception of boundaries between the self and the Other,' diaspora challenges the natural linkage between nation and state (Duara 1997: 56). Thus because diaspora – almost by definition – lack political status, they present epistemological and ontological problems for International Relations (IR) theory that is regulated by states and international regimes (see Lavie and Swedenburg 1996, 15; and Appadurai 1996). Hence I argue that the positivist/post-positivist debate is not exhausted by the sociological turn of Constructivism seen in books such as

Katzenstein's *The Culture of National Security* (1996). Other critical IR scholars are turning to anthropology and ethnographic methods to show how borders of territory and identity are negotiated in the social relations of identity and difference.

This ethnographic approach encourages us to look in different places for world politics, shifting away from state actors to transnational non-state actors, from geopolitics and International Political Economy (IPE) to economic-culture, and from law and institutions as the foundations of international society to the less formal organisations of diasporic public spheres (Weldes, et al. 1999; also see Lapid and Kratochwil 1996; and Krause and Williams, 1997). Instead of discovering a coherent national culture that is easily essentialised as a discrete 'substance' that affects state policy, Weldes, et al. (1999: 2) see culture as multiple and 'composed of potentially contested codes and representations, as designating a field on which are fought battles over meaning.'<sup>5</sup> Whereas the sociological approach searches for 'norms' as positive values, anthropological approaches foreground how communities are formed by excluding difference: security depends upon insecurities. Negotiations between identity and difference thus are not simply clashes between the specific norms of national identities; insecurities also come from conceptual differences such as nation/diaspora and nation/cosmopolitan.

The detailed and decentred analysis afforded by an ethnographic approach enables us to examine how the identity of diasporic Chinese is meaningful not just as an 'ethnic problem' in the Post Cold War world. The Chinese diaspora has been crucial for global capitalism, national identity, and provincial politics for over a century. Diaspora are useful, in other words, just because they are strange. In the context of IR theory they show the relations of power that constitute both national identity and alternatives to it (Weldes, et al. 1999: 17, 20; Shapiro 1997). This ethnographic approach to the transnational politics of diaspora allows us to look in different places for evidence. For example, the reigning paradigms for the political economy of East Asia typically do not emphasise cultural elements – developmental state theory and neoclassical economics are transfixed by struggles between the state and the market (Robison, et al., 2000; Woo-Cumings 1999; World Bank 1993). This essay builds on recent studies that highlight the interplay of political economy and culture in regional and transnational politics to examine diasporic economic-culture (Cumings 1999; Dirlik 1998; Katzenstein 1997; Ong 1999; Shapiro and Alker 1996; Appadurai 1996; Nonini and Ong 1997; and Campbell 1998). We are often told that overseas Chinese capitalism, also called Confucian capitalism, relies on the economic-culture of 'a positive attitude toward the affairs of the world, a sustained lifestyle of discipline and self cultivation, respect for authority, frugality, and an overriding concern for stable family life' (Berger 1988: 7-8; see Bolt 2000). The small and medium-sized family firms of Chinese capitalism are noted for flexibility and quick decision-making. Together these values describe a network capitalism that works according to *guanxi*-relationships between diasporic Chinese entrepreneurs and officials in the PRC.

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<sup>5</sup> Also see Shapiro (1997: 36) and Dirlik (1998).

The comparative advantage of the diaspora's Confucian capitalism is that cultural ties lower the transaction costs of doing business in China where the legal system is underdeveloped. Rather than just looking to formal institutional regimes, which are state-based, economic-culture also allows us to examine how the informal practices of everyday life produce nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

Yet economic-culture, as a set of 'core values' is conceptually problematic: it has been used as shorthand to explain both the unique transnational characteristics that produced the Asia economic miracle and the unique Thai values that resist globalisation (Tu 1996; Berger 1988; Pasuk and Baker 2000: 210). But when we use the anthropological approach, which examines politics in terms of the tension between identity and difference, we can see the *guanxi* network of relationships is not simply between ethnic Chinese and for economic gain. An examination of the relations between identity and difference shows how diasporic insecurities produce identity in both its nationalist and cosmopolitan forms. As we will see, these boundaries are not territorial, but cultural and economic; power is not measured just according to military force and economic growth, but according to the diasporic public sphere's 'cultural arsenals' of temples, fraternal organisations, newspapers and schools (Duara 1997: 50; also see Appadurai 1996: 4). Economic-culture therefore is a useful way of describing culture as a set of practices rather than a set of ideas.

Still, to understand how diaspora both constructs and deconstructs nationalism and cosmopolitanism, we need to employ a critical use of the anthropological approach. The weakness of an anthropological approach is the opposite of a sociological approach: it tends to by-pass the state by jumping directly from the tribal to the post-national, the local to the global. Hence, this paper will examine nation-states as well as mobility and flexibility. The first two sections of this essay will analyse essential notions of nation-state and diaspora to show how overseas Chinese have been crucial in the production of Chinese and Thai nationalism. While cosmopolitan Chinese activities involve transnational flows of capital, populations and information, they are not only post nationalist disjunctures that call boundaries into question. In China, overseas Chinese are used not just as a financial resource to fund revolutions in the past and economic reforms in the present; they have been an important symbolic resource in the construction of Chinese nationalism. The second section will show firstly how diasporic Chinese were the main insecurity against which Thai nationalism was constructed in the twentieth century. Secondly, it will argue that in the late 1990s Sino-Thai switched from resisting nationalism to producing it: they have been among the main promoters of neo-nationalism in Thailand. Hence the diaspora does not just challenge the nation-state, but is an important cosmopolitan part of nationalism.

The third section will highlight how the diaspora forms a set of new communities and thus new borders among Sino-Thai in Thailand. Though they may seem national, we should be clear that these borders are not the juridical-legal territorial borders of the nation-state, so much as economic and cultural borders of various communities in the national centre of Bangkok, the transnational

node of Phuket, and Mahasarakham province. Rather than being mobile, 'seeking opportunities elsewhere,' the ethnography of these three sites will show how diasporic Chinese respond to political, economic and cultural opportunities in these contexts. The flexible economic-cultures of diasporic Chinese, thus, are key elements in the construction of social and economic borders. These new borders are not simply symbolic constructions; the third section will show how Sino-Thai communities are supported by the informal organisations and networks of a diasporic public sphere. The essay thus highlights both the dynamic interaction between Chinese, Thai and Sino-Thai identity construction, and the mutual production of cosmopolitan and national politics. Diaspora not only adds new data to arguments about global/local relations. It helps us question the structures of world politics that look to the opposition between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Hence 'think[ing] of ourselves beyond the nation' is not enough (Appadurai 1996: 158); we also have to think of ourselves beyond the cosmopolitan. Theoretically, my argument pushes beyond the norms of sociological approaches to see how identity is constructed in tension with difference in specific contexts. Though we cannot generalise so confidently about identity and norms, we will be able to generalise about the logic of the relation between identity and difference.

## **I. CHINESE IDENTITY: NEO-NATIONALISM AND DIASPORA**

The Chinese diaspora has always been a problematic concept. As either nationalists or cosmopolitans, overseas Chinese have been measured against the norm of a single and coherent culture. The policy choices of assimilation and multiculturalism both look to a core of Chinese culture that is either modified or preserved. Wang Gungwu's problems in even naming this population are indicative: the first substantive footnotes in many of his essays lament the difficulty of defining Chineseness or naming the overseas Chinese (Wang 1991: 216, 236, 253). But rather than trying to define overseas Chinese as a coherent 'thing,' we need to understand their identity as a relation. This section argues that the nation and the diaspora are not separate autonomous 'substances' with core identities; Chinese nationalism and diaspora take on meaning in relation to each other. Indeed, the concepts of 'nationalism' and 'overseas Chinese' both appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, and I argue that this was not a coincidence: nationalism and cosmopolitanism produced each other in tension. In this section then, I will first examine how Chinese nationalism is not regulated by a collection of core values as mainstream texts tell us; identity has been produced against the difference of Western empire, Chinese empire and diasporic Chinese. This is not simply a history lesson, for the dynamic of nationalism and cosmopolitanism is again producing Chinese identity in familiar ways. For the past fifteen years, PRC policy has been to not simply to recruit overseas Chinese as patriotic investors, but to re-educate the diaspora in national history.

Since the 1990s, nationalism has once again become a major topic in Chinese politics, with many security studies analysts searching for the guiding norms of Chinese civilisation. The hyper-realism of Chinese foreign policy, for example, needs to be understood not just according to the economic analysis of the

Chinese state as a rational actor, but according to exotic culture and history (Swaine and Tellis 2000; Zheng 1999; Johnston 1996; Dittmer and Kim 1993). In both academic and popular culture within China itself, the rise of nationalism has likewise been accompanied by a rediscovery of China's glorious 5000-year civilisation. National Studies Fever – *Guoxue re* – in the 1990s stressed the achievements of the Chinese nation in a very positive way. But this new nationalism also created new enemies: Guoxue's nativist search for 'authentic' ways of being Chinese can be both anti-modern and anti-Western.

The timing of this rediscovery of Chinese nationalism is important; like with Western IR theory, the end of the Cold War called dominant theories into question in China. In the early 1990s, the PRC faced political and economic crises both domestically with the Tiananmen Massacre, and globally with the fall of the Soviet Union. Though the economic reform policy was reasserted in 1992, the political struggle was resolved in favour of a neo-conservative nationalism. The PRC has particular ways of promoting this new form of nationalism. While positive notions of identity proliferated via Guoxue, a more negative production of identity has also been prominent. The 1990s also saw the re-appearance of the discourse of National Humiliation. Like Guoxue, it first became prominent in the 1910s and 1920s as China faced the twin challenges of imperialism and modernity. While Guoxue addressed the problems of modernity, National Humiliation – *Guochi* – addressed the problem of imperialism. Thus National Salvation does not make sense separate from National Humiliation. To understand neo-nationalism and national security, it is necessary to understand national insecurities. In other words, we need to reverse Paul Kennedy's famous thesis about 'the rise and fall of the great powers,' to examine the 'fall and rise' of China.

Chinese textbooks characteristically talk of the 'Century of National Humiliation' to define modern Chinese history and to celebrate the foundation of the PRC in 1949. The discourse recounts how at the hands of foreign invaders and corrupt Chinese regimes, sovereignty was lost, territory dismembered, and the Chinese people thus humiliated. The Opium War whereby the British navy pried open the Chinese empire to Western capitalism is usually seen as the beginning of the century of national humiliation, and the communist revolution in 1949 is the end. As a key patriotic education textbook puts it: 'Never forget national humiliation.... The invasion of the imperialist powers and the domestic reactionary ruling class's corrupt stupidity together created the roots of this catastrophe' (Guo 1996: 126).

Thus the foreign Other is not the only focus of national humiliation. The Chinese nation has its problems too. The primary contradiction of foreign imperialism was exacerbated by the ineptitude of the various regimes that preceded the PRC: the misdeeds of the Qing dynasty and the Republican regime are summarised as 'domestic corrupt stupidity.' This is not simply a battle against a different race (the Qing were Manchu) or different ideology (the Republican leaders were from the rival political party) because both of these groups are condemned as Chinese traitors who 'sold out the nation.' The conclusion that the discourse of national humiliation draws is that the Chinese people need a

strong state to save the nation from evil imperialists: past, present and future. This discourse is very popular in both official and popular culture in China. Long after the century ended in 1949, national humiliation springs up in conversation and public opinion to explain diplomatic crises such as the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, campaigns to host the Olympics in 1993 and 2001, and the crash of the US EP-3 surveillance plane in 2001 (see Callahan forthcoming). Thus National Humiliation discourse uses modern Chinese history to secure the Chinese people to a particular territory. This essentialist construction of identity takes both Chinese people and Chinese territory as self-evident categories. National Humiliation forcefully reasserts the hyphen between nation and state.

### **Diasporic identity**

There was also a rebirth of overseas Chinese identity in the late 1980s because of two factors that accompanied Deng's economic reforms. The open door policy allowed a host of 'new immigrants' to leave China. It also invited the older generation of wealthy overseas Chinese to return and invest in their homeland as part of the economic network of 'Greater China.' It is common to assume that Western multinational corporations (MNCs) are the main investors in China. But diasporic Chinese (including from Taiwan and Hong Kong) account for around 80 percent of foreign direct investment in the PRC. This significant to the global political economy because the PRC is the second ranking host country for foreign investment after the US (Bolt 2000: 1, 3, 9; Shambaugh 1995; Callahan 2002).

Overseas Chinese identity has been involved in a cosmopolitan dynamic that largely bypasses not just Southeast Asian nation-states, but the PRC as well. Popular business authors such as John Naisbitt and noted academics such as Tu Weiming have both stressed that Greater China and overseas Chinese economic success need to be understood separately from Beijing's centralised political control. Naisbitt (1996: 7) writes, 'It is not China. It is the Chinese network' to explain the grand shift in economic activity from nation-states to networks. In the early 1990s, Tu (1994: 12) likewise noted the 'glaring absence of the PRC' in East Asian success stories, and argued that now the 'periphery [i.e. the Chinese diaspora] sets the agenda for the centre.'

Here I will argue that we also need to consider how diasporic identity is produced in relation to the nation-state. The PRC has laboured to see Chineseness as an essential identity tied to its state. The relation of overseas identity and domestic nationalism is shown in the creation of the term for overseas Chinese, *huaqiao*. Though Chinese have been travelling overseas for millennia, the creation of a single term to name this group is quite recent, taking form at the same time that nationalism gained currency in China. Before 1893, there was a legal ban on overseas travel. The government saw unofficial travellers as 'vagabonds, fugitives, or outlaws' who risked punishment as criminals upon return to China (Wang 2000: 43; McKeown 1999: 323). The constitution of *huaqiao* identity is not just part of the production of Chinese nationalism, but is related to national humiliation. Historically, Chinese only

migrated in large numbers as a result of the economic and political dislocation that started with the 'invasion of foreign countries' capitalism' after the Opium War (Ren and Zhao 1999: 2; Wang 1992). As Wang argues, the term *huaqiao* was crafted by the Qing regime 'to encourage sojourners to identify with China and Chinese civilisation' (Wang 2000: 47). Though *huaqiao* was a new word, it had an ancient pedigree which framed the overseas Chinese as an 'elegant and respectable' group (Wang 2000: 46; also see Duara 1997: 42-3). Thus in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, overseas Chinese were transformed from outlaws into honoured mandarins as part of an imperial nationalism.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, overseas Chinese are again being recruited into the narrative of national humiliation as patriotic 'sons of the Yellow Emperor' who thus form 'a part of China's history which is spattered with blood and tears' (Ren and Zhao 1999, 380-81, 1). Thus the Chinese state once again is trying to not only lure overseas Chinese investment in the PRC, but also to re-educate the diaspora into national humiliation history. Official national humiliation texts are increasingly co-published in Hong Kong in traditional Chinese characters for wider distribution. Specialised texts have been directed squarely at Hong Kong and diasporic audiences to knit them into official nationalism. For example, in the preface to a slick national humiliation text, the Director of the Chinese Revolutionary History Museum in Beijing tells us the book 'will help overseas Chinese, especially our young friends overseas, to understand this period of the motherland's history' (Shen 1997: 7).<sup>6</sup>

Mainland descriptions of the overseas Chinese experience neatly mirror the logic of national humiliation discourse. Similar to Guo's patriotic education textbook cited above, Ren and Zhao (1999: 5) list the reasons for the diaspora as stemming from both foreign invasion and domestic corruption: 'among the foreign reasons we must stress the frenzied plunder of China's cheap labour by the foreign invaders, among the domestic reasons we must stress the basic corruption and ineptitude of the Qing government, which was powerless to protect our people from the foreigner invaders' human trafficking...' (also see Yang 1991: 47). Chinese identity thus expands via national humiliation from being defined according to citizenship and territoriality to a wider transnational view of the Chinese race: 'China is not just the most populous country in the world; it also has the most populous diaspora' (Ren and Zhao 1999: 380). According to these sources, the 25 million diasporic Chinese constitute the third largest economy in the world. Overseas Chinese therefore are characteristically figured as a financial resource for the Chinese nationalist project. This financial aid also has lent the various revolutions and regimes added symbolic legitimacy: the PRC and Taiwan still struggle for the loyalty of overseas Chinese as part of their transnational national reunification strategies (Wang 2000: 67).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This museum is one of the key institutions of the discourse of national humiliation. To see how it framed the mainland Chinese understanding of the return of Hong Kong see Callahan (2002).

<sup>7</sup> This is the main topic of Ren and Zhao's Chinese language book *Overseas Chinese and Nationalist Party-Communist Party Relations*.

The national shame, therefore, is not just about the loss of the Chinese body politic where imperialist powers divided up the 'sacred territory,' but of the loss of many Chinese bodies. The purpose of founding a strong nation was not just to reunify China, but also to protect diasporic Chinese who otherwise 'deeply know the shame and pain of a weak country.' Hence, according to mainland sources, overseas Chinese understand that 'their own destiny is wrapped up in the destiny of the motherland' (Ren and Zhao 1999: 9). Indeed, the language of national humiliation is key in mainland understandings of diaspora. Persecution of Chinese overseas during century of national humiliation was not just physical or financial, but a question of 'respect' – or the lack of it: 'If Chinese people were bullied locally, that was because China received no respect internationally' (McKeown 1999: 326; also see Yang 1991: 45). The rape of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia was therefore seen as a measure of the diplomatic weakness of the PRC. Overseas Chinese experience thus not only becomes a chapter in the history of national humiliation textbooks as a problem to be solved, but as a 'reflection of the development of modern Chinese history' itself (Liang 1999: 25-31; also see Li and Peng 1995: 61-82; Yang 1991: 43; Ding 1999).

Diasporic Chinese therefore are not simply a financial resource for China. The dynamic of diasporic persecution and national humiliation is used as a symbolic resource for producing Chinese national identity. Curiously, these financial and symbolic resources, which are transnational and deterritorialised in diaspora, are used to consolidate the identity of the Chinese nation. The more obvious the national difference abroad, the greater the need for a strong Chinese state to protect the diaspora both diplomatically and militarily. It is common to conclude that diasporic Chinese nationalism ended in the 1950s, with the end of immigration from the PRC and the rise of postcolonial nationalism in Southeast Asia (Wang 1991). But nationalism continues to grow both at home and abroad. Over the last century, a series of atrocities provoked national outrage among new and old immigrants: at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by anti-Chinese immigration policies in North America and Australasia, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by the Anti-Japanese War and the Rape of Nanjing, and at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the rape and murder of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. In each of these cases, the national and the cosmopolitan produce each other, regardless of whether it is the diaspora protesting national problems or the nation protesting diasporic problems. In other words, though we often assume that nationalism is defined by positive norms, there is nothing like a humiliating atrocity to unite a diverse and dispersed population into a community (see Clifford 1994 and Chaliand and Rageau 1997). In addition to gathering around glorious Chinese civilisation, diasporic Chinese communities increasingly identify with the national humiliation of such atrocities. As Buruma (1999: 4) sarcastically concludes, 'It is, it appears, not enough for Chinese-Americans to be seen as the heirs of a great civilisation; they want to be recognised as heirs of their very own Holocaust.' Hence, overseas Chinese not only network for economic gain in a mobile 'third culture,' but for social and political projects, to produce a transnational form of nationalism.

The next section will turn these questions around first to see how diasporic Chinese have been used in a negative way to produce Thai nationalism. It then will examine how Sino-Thai have been among the most vociferous of the supporters of an inclusive neo-nationalism since 1997. This argument will re-confirm how nationalism depends upon cosmopolitan Chinese, and how diaspora is more than a financial resource because it has considerable symbolic power in constructing and deconstructing the Thai nation.

## II. NEO-NATIONALISM AND DIASPORA IN THAILAND

Nationalism in Thailand has a time-honoured tradition of using diasporic Chinese as the Other against which the Thai-ness is defined. Overseas Chinese were not just the fifth column of republican and then communist revolution in China. They also have been a key element in the formation of Thai nationalism. While Chinese nationals banded together with diaspora to fight against Western imperialism, in Thailand Chinese have been used as a symbolic resource in national identity construction in a negative way: the 'essential outsider' against whom a national self is constructed (Chirot and Reid 1997). Especially after the Chinese republican revolution of 1911 and communist revolution in 1949, the Thai elite questioned the loyalty and utility of their large urban Chinese population. To stem the spread of republican revolutionary ideas in the 1910s and communist ideology in the 1950s, the Thai state strengthened its policy of regulating the Chinese population, especially Chinese education (*Thirakruak Phiti* 1999: 92-3; Wang 1992; and Chan and Tong 2001). Most famously, King Rama VI wrote *Jews of the Orient* (1914) as part of the Thailand's transition from a multi-ethnic empire into an exclusive nation-state.<sup>8</sup> According to the Thai officials, 'Sino-Thai' was a contradiction in terms: you had to be one or the other. Diasporic Chinese nationalism thus both preceded and provoked nationalism in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines (Reid 1997: 51).

Most studies of overseas Chinese identity overlook this negative use of the diaspora by highlighting how Thailand has been accommodating to diasporic Chinese as fellow Buddhists – at least when compared with harsher regimes in the neighbouring Islamic societies of Malaysia and Indonesia (Skinner 1957 and Chan and Tong 2001). For example, then Prime Minister General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh tried to blame Sino-Thai capitalists for the 1997 economic meltdown, calling them 'the nation's problem.' Though this was a very successful diversionary measure in other countries – the state encouraged anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia to save Suharto – it did not work in Thailand. After a public outcry, Chavalit apologised and complained that he had been misunderstood (Chang Noi 1997; also see Kasian 1999: 33-7). This rapid turnaround showed the power of the Sino-Thai who are now not only business people, but also journalists, academics and the civil servants. Actually, it is easier to study diasporic Chinese in Malaysia where difference has been institutionalised into the official ethnic categories of Malay, Chinese and Indian. But as this section will show, Thailand is a useful site to examine diasporic

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<sup>8</sup> Asavabahu (1941). This was King Rama VI's pseudonym.

Chinese identity production just because of the ambiguous nature of the distinction between Chinese and Thai. As Chavalit's awkward experience shows, people have to work hard to make distinctions between the Chinese, Thai and Sino-Thai populations.

While neo-nationalism arose in China to address a political crisis – the end of the Cold War and the Tiananmen massacre – in Thailand neo-nationalism became an issue because of an economic crisis. Due to a range of factors that have been well-analysed elsewhere, the Thai economy abruptly slipped from four decades of uninterrupted growth into a world-class depression in July 1997 (see Robison et al. 2000). Once the Baht was floated on international currency markets it lost half its value, spurring the Thai government to secure a US\$17 billion rescue package from the IMF. These funds came with the conditionality of a structural adjustment of the Thai political economy that stressed policy and institutional reforms that would promote open markets and good governance. The Thai government passed a raft of bills to reform bankruptcy and foreclosure laws, and to loosen up restrictions on foreign ownership. The result was the closure of three-quarters of the finance companies and the nationalisation of four of Thailand's major banks, which together wiped out one third of Thailand's financial system. 69,000 other companies needed debt restructuring. MNCs from Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Europe and the US bought Thai assets at 'fire sale' prices. At the nadir of the crisis in 1998, the economy contracted by nine percent, poverty rose by 20 percent, and unemployment to over two million (Hewison 2000b, Pasuk and Baker 2000).

### **Economics and neo-nationalism**

Surprisingly, the first political reaction to the 1997 economic crisis in Thailand was not the expected nationalism that would target the usual suspects, the overseas Chinese. Instead, Thai public intellectuals created a new set of Others: liberals and the West. According to the neo-nationalists, the solution to the 1997 economic crisis was not a financial re-structuring, but a reassertion of Thai national identity and economy. Thai neo-nationalism trumpeted the notion of economic and cultural self-sufficiency which often romanticised the Buddhist village community as part of its rejection of urbanism, consumerism and industrialism.

Neo-nationalism in Thailand thus uses a similar set of images to Chinese neo-nationalism: Thai as slaves to foreigners, the semi-colonialism of economic imperialism, and immoral foreign robber barons. While treaties signed between 1842 and 1942 were seen as unequal and thus illegitimate in China's Century of National Humiliation, Thai foreign debt in 1997 was framed as illegitimate. Once again, foreign invasion and domestic corruption: the debts that the Thai public had to pay were created by the exploitative policies of the West in collaboration with the corrupt elite in Bangkok (Khamprakat Haeng Yuksamai 2000, 13ff; Pasuk and Baker 2000; Prapat, et al. 2000, 225-8). The purpose of Thai neo-nationalism is to 'save the nation' from such corrupt traitors who risked 'selling out the nation.' Indeed, the United Thai for National Salvation Club was formed in 2000 to argue this case. This Club sponsored a special issue of *Political*

*Economy*, 'The Declaration of Neo-Nationalism,' which was published to influence the political campaign for the January 2001 general election – which was won by a 'nationalist' party.<sup>9</sup>

Though it is easy to write off Thai neo-nationalism as a knee-jerk populist reaction to a painful crisis that was used instrumentally by some political parties, it is important to understand it in its full complexity. This neo-nationalism gathered together an often contradictory group of promoters from political, economic and civil society: the monarchist/bureaucratic elite, national business leaders and progressive grassroots activists all called for a return to a national/local economy. Some criticised economic liberalisation in order to promote social justice for the poor and oppressed, others – including businessmen – expanded the criticism of globalisation to target the immorality of capitalism and consumerism more generally.<sup>10</sup> Utopian views of the Thai Buddhist village community culture can serve two purposes. On the one hand, they have been part of this localist notion of economic-culture, but on the other, they are now used by conservative institutions to promote the authoritarian linkage of 'Nation, Religion and Monarchy' first proposed by King Rama VI. For example, the Ministry of the Interior tried to turn the grassroots social democracy of neo-nationalism into yet another top-down development strategy (Ministry of Interior 1998; Hewison 2000a: 290).

Actually, the neo-nationalists did not engage in a debate about the merits of alternative development strategies – they did not present an economic plan (Hewison 2000a: 291; Chang Noi 2000). Even the 'nationalist' prime minister who was elected in January 2001 does not have a coherent nationalist economic policy: sometimes he praises self-sufficiency; other times he promotes foreign investment and an export-oriented economy. But rather than looking at what divides these various strands of neo-nationalism, it is important to see how neo-nationalism only makes sense in terms of its relation to the Other. The progressive, bourgeois and reactionary nationalists – who fundamentally disagree about most issues in Thai politics – are unified here by a common target: foreign capitalism, specifically the IMF. As one newspaper commentator put it, 'This new nationalism is the child of the IMF's [Managing Director] Michel Camdessus...' (Chang Noi 2000). According to this argument, the issues are not about the political economy of class and capitalism, but the economic-culture of territory and citizenship. The President of the Thai Senate proclaimed, 'the poor, struggling, indebted Thai are threatened by rich, foreign creditors' (*The Nation* [Bangkok], 12 February 1998). Thus Thai business, even if it is a 'monopoly or oligopoly' is seen by neo-nationalists as better because the wealth still stays in the country (Narong Phetprasert cited in Nantiya 2000). Likewise, all the neo-nationalist groups looked to Malaysian Prime Minister

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<sup>9</sup> Numerous articles in newspapers and magazines were published on the topic, as well as a special issue of another Thai journal, *New Politics*, which is much more critical of neo-nationalism (Chatniyom 2001). It is noteworthy that neo-nationalist articles appeared in *Political Economy*, a journal otherwise well-known for its critical left-wing perspective.

<sup>10</sup> For studies of this, see McCargo (2001); Hewison (2000a); Pasuk and Baker (2000); Wittayakorn (2000); Narong Chokwattana (2000); Chatthip and Siriphorn (2000); and Kasian (1999: 41).

Mahathir's strong mercantilist response to the crisis. Malaysia's capital controls were praised more for their ideological meaning than their economic efficacy: Mahathir was hailed because he did not bow to the IMF. This support was a major shift for many of the progressive neo-nationalists who previously had been critical of Mahathir's authoritarian politics (Amarin 2000a; Pasuk and Baker 2000: 176; Hewison 2001b: 220).

Those in Thailand who questioned the efficacy or ethics of neo-nationalism are summarily dismissed as 'naïve,' 'weak, stupid, and morally cowardly,' 'crazily following Western slogans of liberalisation, globalisation, and accountability,' 'stupidly following foreigners,' 'being brainwashed by foreigners,' 'childishly liberal,' 'alarmist and frankly intolerant,' and 'blindly following the global system.'<sup>11</sup> In its more extreme form, neo-nationalism dismisses those who supported a liberal political economy not only as stupid, but also as un-Thai traitors who wish to 'sell the country' (Khamprakat Haeng Yuksamai 2000: 18-22; Narong Chokwattana 2000: 94-5; Kasian 1999: 41; Pasuk and Baker 2000: 161ff.) One commentator approvingly notes how traitors who sold out the country to Burma in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century were beheaded under King Taksin (Likhit 2000; also see Amarin 2000b).

### **Democracy and neo-nationalism**

The Thai do not have to go back 200 years for examples of a violent enforcement of nationalism. Many of these same activists and opinion-makers were victims of the Thai state's criminalisation of difference in the recent past. Up until 1973, nationalism in Thailand was largely used as a tool by a series of military dictatorships to repress left-wing movements. Even after the popular democracy interregnum of 1973-76, progressive politics has largely been understood as anti-military or pro-democracy rather than as pro-nationalist.

Memories of a repressive anti-Chinese nationalism were still fresh just before the economic crisis in 1997. Reacting to renewed calls for a right-wing nationalism that excluded Sino-Thai as communists, Kasian Tejapira (1999: 197) wrote:

Thai has many forms. There are communist Thai, fascist Thai, democratic Thai, dictator Thai, Free Thai, and tyrant Thai. Now I am no longer a communist, but I want to insist that communists are also Thai in the same way as fascists are Thai. Therefore Thai who have different ideas should try to express their ideas peacefully instead of shooting M16s from helicopters or firing rounds from tanks.<sup>12</sup>

Here Kasian is part of the general movement among a new generation of Thai neo-nationalists to be more inclusive and democratic. It is noteworthy that many

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<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with Chaiwat Satha-Anand, Bangkok, 14 December 2000; and from Prapat, et al. (2000: 225-8); Dej (2000); Somchai (2000); Pasuk and Baker (2000: 215); and Chang Noi (2000).

<sup>12</sup> Also see Chang Noi (1997) and Chatniyom (2001).

of the essays go out of their way to cite as authorities progressive nationalist heroes such as Pridi Phanomyong, rather than militant nationalists such as Field Marshals P. Phibulsongkram (Phibul) or Sarit Thanarat. Indeed, many of the same people who were pushing for liberal or grassroots democracy in the early 1990s (against military dictatorship) now argued for a democratic nationalism (against economic imperialism). In this way, the criticisms of corruption are not simply defining domestic enemies, but entail a critical engagement with reform politics and extra-parliamentary popular politics. Many of the more thoughtful writers are trying to pry nationalism away from the military and bureaucratic elite to guide popular democracy. The Nation is defined by the elements of the people, liberty and justice (Narong Chokwattana in Chatniyom 2001: 24; Dej 2000; Whittiyakorn 2000; Kasian 1999; Nidhi Aoesriwong in Chatniyom 2001: 9).

### **Race and neo-nationalism**

Certainly, Thai nationalism has been involved in racial politics. This can be graphically seen in the change of names by the militarist regime in 1939: 'Siam' named a multi-ethnic country, while 'Thailand' is racially exclusive. Neo-nationalists are quite aware of the anti-Chinese history of their ideology. But their reaction since 1997 has not been to reject nationalism, as had many progressives in the past, but to embrace an explicitly inclusive form of Thai nationalism. Unlike in China where neo-nationalism is closely related to ethnicity, the key here to being Thai is not pure Thai blood, but citizenship and participation in Thai life. Thus 'genuine nationalism' is differentiated from racism (Kasian 1997: 88, 1999; Likhit 2000; Amarin 2000a; Nantiya 2000).

Part of this shift toward toleration is practical. Even if the Thai elite desired to once again discriminate against diasporic Chinese – as Chavalit saw in 1997 – logistically it would be very difficult. In the past 'Chinese' lived in certain communities – Chinatowns – and engaged in certain businesses. But now Chinese and Thai have intermixed to such an extent that they are difficult to differentiate. Authentic Thai-ness is not just an ideological non-issue, but a racial non-issue as well. As Kasian (1999: 40-1), a theorist of both neo-nationalism and Sino-Thai identity, argues:

The ultra-nationalist history cannot blame the economic crisis in the 1990s on the Sino-Thai because Thailand in 1998 is much different from Thailand during Phibul era of sixty years ago. During Phibul's era, the nationalist movement was anti-Chinese. The imaginary lines that divided between Thai and Chinese were possible. But by now, 'Chineseness' has been assimilated into 'Thai-ness' and cannot be easily separated. Therefore now it is difficult to draw a line to divide *Jek* [Chinese] from the Thai and claim that *Jek* are the national enemies. The

boundary of the definition of Thai-ness has already expanded to include *Jek* to unite with the Thai....<sup>13</sup>

But this seemingly cosmopolitan nationalism is not completely differentiated from racism. While Thai national identity now includes Chinese and other non-Thai ethnic groups, this expansion of the self has necessitated the creation of a new Other. The new racism targets the West, and is often anti-American.

This new Occidentalism arose in a specific context: in 1998, parliament debated the new bankruptcy and foreclosure laws at the same time that it modified the Alien Business Law. Hence many Thai felt that the government was simply selling Thailand to Western MNCs – cheap. Actually, many of the buyers were from fellow Asian countries: Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan (Hewison 2000b: 219; Pasuk and Baker 2000: 218). It is not just foreign firms that are preying upon a prostrate Thailand. Thai firms have also gone transnational: Thailand's CP Group is the largest foreign investor in China (Ampalavanar-Brown 1998: 611). And one 'Manifesto of Neo-nationalism' laments that the Thai have lost their transnational capitalist opportunities: 'I see that Singaporeans, Hong Kongers and Taiwanese own many businesses in our neighbouring countries such as Burma, Cambodia and Laos. What a pity that the Thai have lost these opportunities. (Wichit 2000: 224; also see Chang Noi 2000). But such political-economic arguments miss the point, because the issue was the economic-culture of Thai identity which was framed in racial terms: neo-nationalism was not simply anti-American, but anti-White. Rather than talking about the Yellow Peril of a Chinese threat to Thailand, as King Rama VI did in 1914, now there are warnings of the 'White Peril' (Suthachai 2000: 68; Chang Noi 2000; Narong Phetprasert in Nantiya 2000). Like with national humiliation in China, the problem is not simply the IMF or liberalism, but the barbaric White race which is trying (once again) to subjugate the vulnerable Asian masses (Khamprakat Haeng Yuksamai 2000: 22-6; Likhit 2000; Surat 2000; Wichit 2000: 221ff; Kasian 1999: 41).

Thus a new Thai self is produced by a new Other in much the same way as National Salvation in China needs National Humiliation. With the economic crisis of 1997, neo-nationalism arose not as a positive movement hailing the glories of the core values of Thai culture – Nation, Religion and Monarchy in official discourse – but in relation to difference. Much the same logic and vocabulary was used as in previous incarnations of Thai hyper-nationalism, but this time with a twist: Sino-Thai activists were among the most prominent promoters of an inclusive and democratic neo-nationalism. But this new broader nationalism still depends upon difference: the Other of the 'White Peril' of the IMF and the West. Thai neo-nationalism, therefore, is similar to Chinese neo-nationalism in terms of its logic and themes, if not in terms of content – this national unification is of the Thai citizenry rather than the Chinese race.

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<sup>13</sup> Also based on author's interview with Suwanna Satha-Anand, Bangkok, 27 August 1999; Author's interviews in Phuket, December 2000.

### III. DIASPORIC CHINESE IN THAILAND

The first two sections have deconstructed essential notions of nation-state and diaspora to show how diasporic Chinese have been crucial in the production of Chinese and Thai nationalism. While cosmopolitan Chinese activities involve transnational flows of capital, populations and information, they are not only post-nationalist disjunctures that call boundaries into question. In the previous sections, we saw how cosmopolitanism and nationalism produce each other. This section will highlight how the diaspora forms a set of new communities and thus new borders. Though they may seem national, we should be clear that these are not the territorial borders of the nation-state, so much as economic and cultural borders of various communities. The new borders are not simply symbolic constructions; as we will see, they are supported by non-state actors' 'concrete institutions and networks' (McKeown 1999: 322; Liu 1998).

More importantly, these communities will show how problematic Thai and Chinese neo-nationalism are in these contexts. Even though neo-nationalism was at the height of its popularity in Bangkok during my fieldwork period in 2000-01, it was not an issue that excited interest amongst diasporic Chinese educators, businessmen, politicians, and clan organisers. The neo-nationalist debate is largely restricted to elite groups in Bangkok who are looked upon with suspicion by provincial businessmen and grassroots organisers alike. They fear that anti-urbanism and anti-capitalism will once again target ethnic Chinese merchants (Viraphon Sopha, farmers' organizer in Northeast Thailand, in Chatniyom 2001: 26; Pasuk and Baker 2000: 172-74; Chang Noi 1997). This last section uses fieldwork in Thailand to demonstrate how economic-culture is constructed in three very different contexts: the national centre in Bangkok, a transnational node in Phuket, and the rural province of Mahasarakham. I chose these three sites because they should best exemplify nationalist, cosmopolitan and local economic-cultures in Thailand. But the complex ethnographies of these three sites will show how the diaspora calls into question neo-nationalism, globalism and localism. Thus the identity politics is not simply between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, as most research on diaspora states, but between diaspora and context in national, transnational and local spaces.

#### Diasporic Chinese in Bangkok

Comparing two global conventions of overseas Chinese in Bangkok shows the inter/national nature of diasporic Chinese activity in the capital that produces national boundaries in new ways. The Seventh World Huang Clan Association Convention (1999) functioned quite differently from the World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention (1995). Rather than gathering individual businesspeople into a transnational network, as the cosmopolitan diaspora narrative would suggest, the World Huang Clan Association conference gathered *national* Huang clan associations (*Diqijie Shijie Huang Shizong* 1999; Liu 1998: 586). Indeed, the world body was created and promoted by the Taiwanese Huang Clan Association in 1980 as part of Taiwan's informal

diplomacy of national reunification since it was ejected from the United Nations in 1971.

Certainly, the World Huang Clan Association is one of the transnational bodies that exemplify the invisible empire of the overseas Chinese. The Huang clan even has its own anthem which sings of bringing together brothers from around the world. Glorious civilisation is praised in familiar ways: 'our country is the country of manners.' But it is not clear whether they are referring to Chinese civilisation or Huang civilisation. While standard Chinese texts celebrate 5000 years of glorious Chinese civilisation, the Huang clan convention program states that 'for more than 4000 years our people have not forgotten their Huang roots.' The unification of the various peoples from ancient times is not simply to unify the motherland in 1949, but to unify the transnational Huang clan in 1980 (Huang Youhe in *Diqijie* 1999: 16; Huang Song in *Diqijie* 1999: 13; Huang Tongqing in *Diqijie* 1999: 18).<sup>14</sup>

But the convention also shows the intensely national nature of the association: the Huang associations are not anti-national or post-national, but look to Thai national leaders and symbols as part of clan identity. While World Chinese Entrepreneurs conventions are 'patronized by prominent Chinese transnational entrepreneurs, with the blessing of [non-Chinese] local [i.e. national] political leaders,' the World Huang Clan Association's program makes sure to celebrate the powerful Thai national politicians who are members of the Huang clan (Liu 1998: 586; *Diqijie Shijie Huang Shizong* 1999: 47-8). More to the point, the Thai organisers of the Huang convention made sure to appeal to national symbols: the first page of the program has an official photograph of the Thai king and queen. The genealogy of illustrious Huang ancestors only comes second. In a more prosaic sense, the mission of each Huang association is national: the Bangkok-based group is a charitable organisation which takes care of Huang clans-people in Thailand. Cosmopolitan activities are organised according to the borders of the host nation-state.

This nationalisation of clan organisations is part of the firming up of Thai borders in the past decade. While there has been much talk about globalisation breaking down the borders of the nation-state, since the 1980s the Thai state has been solidifying its physical and economic borders. Huge construction projects have spent scarce resources to build roads to clarify Thailand's borders with Burma and Malaysia, and embankments to stabilise its riparian border with Laos (Author's interview with Ah Gok Liang, Manager of the Huang Association of Thailand, Bangkok, 16 December 2000). Likewise, years before neo-nationalism emerged in 1997, the state has been rationalising/nationalising customs and immigration procedures to assert central Bangkok control over the political economy. Thailand is involved in a global network economy. But the main Thai node of this network is Bangkok, the capital of the nation-state.

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<sup>14</sup> Bolt and McKeown make similar points for other migrant associations (Bolt 2000: 31; McKeown 1999: 326).

The cosmopolitan Chinese associations in Bangkok work according to this inter/national logic. Here they provide evidence for standard views of overseas Chinese politics: Sino-Thai organisations serve as bridges between China, Thailand and other nation-states (Wu 1999: 1-2; Ong 1999: 133). For example, in 1998 the fifty-five clan associations of Thailand sent letters both to the Indonesian embassy to protest the atrocities against ethnic Chinese, and to the Chinese embassy to demand action for Chinese compatriots. This shows how the Chinese clan associations based in Bangkok work according to the diplomatic logic of the nation-state: even though they represent transnational groups, they still gather together according to Thai boundaries to petition the nation-states of Indonesia and the PRC. National clan associations thus serve as a gateway for inter/national flows of information, capital and charitable relief. They certainly take care of their own domestic Sino-Thai constituency, but they diverge radically from Thai neo-nationalism. They are an inter/national form of nationalism rather than a nativist neo-nationalism. Academic analysis of overseas Chinese communities also characteristically follows this nation-state formula: research is conducted on overseas Chinese society 'in' Thailand, 'in' Malaysia, 'in' Indonesia, 'in' the US, and so on (Chan and Tong 2001). But as we have seen, cosmopolitanism is produced in the tension between nation-states in Thailand and abroad.

### **Diasporic Chinese in Phuket**

Sino-Thai economic-culture in Phuket is different from in Bangkok. In Bangkok, anti-Chineseness is a non-issue because the Chinese have mixed with the Thai to such an extent that you cannot easily tell one from the other. In Phuket, neo-nationalism is not a problem because the Chinese dominate the province, constituting 70 percent of the population. Phuket is both the smallest and the richest province in Thailand. In this way, Phuket is a prosperous ethnic Chinese enclave more like Singapore and Penang than its fellow Thai provinces of Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen.

It is not a coincidence that Phuket has a similar regional economic-culture to Singapore and Penang. The three island-cities are linked in a historic network of Chinese migration facilitated by the European empires in Southeast Asia. While most of the Sino-Thai in Central, Northern and Northeastern Thailand came to the kingdom via Bangkok, most came to Phuket along the 'Southern route' to work in the island's tin mines. This itinerary joined southern China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Penang, Phuket, and southern Burma together in a circuit of diasporic Chinese migration, trade and culture.<sup>15</sup> The itinerary by-passed Bangkok not for political reasons, but because of economies of transport: until recently it took four days to travel overland to Bangkok, while it took just sixteen hours to sail to Penang (Author's interview with Lt. Phummisak Hongsyok, Mayor of Phuket Municipality and Vice President of the Hokkien Association, Phuket, 21 December 2000).

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<sup>15</sup> *The Penguin Atlas of Diasporas* has a map which traces the Southern route. Curiously, it does not list Phuket as a site on this itinerary (Chaliand and Rageau 1997: 131).

Rather than being produced in relation to the nation, diaspora is produced in relation to the British empire as a community of Southeast Asian overseas Chinese, the Nanyang [South Seas] Chinese (Wang 1992: 11-39). Diasporic Chinese activities were organised more around these British imperial nodes than according to Thai national borders. Though mainland Chinese national historiography employs overseas Chinese as an important source of anti-imperialist Chinese national identity, diasporic Chinese were also an integral part of Western imperialism. Another new word, comprador, was coined to describe the Chinese middlemen who facilitated imperial governance. Though Chinese people suffered from the opium and indentured labour regimes, Chinese merchants were key figures in the network economy of the opium and labour trades (McKeown 1999: 316; Ngo 1999; Trocki 1999). When Thai nationalism made Chinese culture a problem in the 1940s and 1950s it was common for ethnic Chinese from Phuket to follow the empire's circuits to send their children to Penang for schooling. Likewise, books for Phuket's Chinese school initially came from Penang and Hong Kong; only later did Taiwan compete with the PRC for influence via patriotic nationalist education.

Phuket's tin mines, and then its tourist industry, have located the island in a transnational political economy since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Trade was conducted not just within the diasporic Chinese network facilitated by the British empire, but directly with North America, Europe, and Australia. Now, because of the consolidation of the Thai state, borders are firmer, and most trade goes through Bangkok. Still, the mayor of Phuket City wished to decentralise state power from Bangkok back to Phuket to encourage both a cosmopolitan economy and good governance. The point is not simply to join a Greater Chinese network – most of the Hokkien majority who dominate Phuket have little interest in China – but to encourage Phuket as a node in a more transnational economy (Author's interview with small businessman, Phuket, 28 December 2000; Author's interview with Lt. Phummisak Hongsyok, Phuket, 21 December 2000).

One way to measure the strength of the Chinese community is to examine the success of Chinese schools. According to this method, the overseas Chinese have been quite successful in Phuket. The Thai-Chinese (*Thai-Hua*) school celebrated its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2000. The alumni of the school are proud to note that Thailand's first private Chinese school was founded in Phuket, not Bangkok. Chinese education has also survived better in Phuket than in other provinces, most probably because of Phuket's high concentration of diasporic Chinese and their political influence in the capital (Author's interview with Thai-Hua School Alumni, Phuket, 21 December 2000). While alumni are proud that their school has survived, they are also humiliated at the school's suffering. The foundation of the school in 1910 puts it firmly in the trend of the growing nationalist consciousness among overseas Chinese (Wang 1992: 40). Yet the timing was also unfortunate: Chinese became a 'problem' when the Thai monarchy was threatened by China's 1911 republican revolution. The Thai state thus had much the same view as the various Chinese regimes: overseas Chinese schools were seen as centres of political influence. The Thai state

needed to control such activity, and hence Chinese schools were either closed down or closely regulated.

Like overseas Chinese history more generally, the school's ninety-year history is hardly stable: it has opened and closed again and again, changing its name several times. Initially it was called the Zhonghua (Chinese) School, and when it was re-opened in 1948 it was called the Thai-Hua (Thai-Chinese) School. It was seen as a threat to Thai nationalism in the Phibul era (1938-44 and 1948-57), and as a communist threat during the Sarit-Thanom-Prapass era (1958-73). Alumni told how during the 1930s and 1950s, when students heard a state inspector coming, they had to burn their Chinese books. Like with diasporic Chinese in general, the humiliation suffered in Phuket was not an epic humiliation of the Chinese nation, but day-to-day harassment. As control of Chinese education was only liberalised in 1992, memories of anti-Chinese policies are still fresh (*Thirakruak Phiti* 1999: 93; Kasian 1997: 95). Even though respondents at the Thai-Hua School did not take the threat of neo-nationalism seriously, their history of humiliation and suffering made them wary. They wanted their remarks reported anonymously, which suggests that they still fear that Thai nationalism entails anti-Chinese activity.

Chinese schools are not just for educating children, but like the clan association examined in Bangkok, they are a centre of community activity. Two other centres for community activity in Phuket are the Chinese temples and Rotary/Lions clubs. The Chinese temple in Phuket is especially noteworthy as it is at the centre of the world-renowned Vegetarian Festival. It draws many tourists from the West, but the Festival also is part of a pilgrimage circuit for Chinese believers. Hence diasporic Chinese relations are reversed. Here, the Sino-Thai are not sojourners who long to return to China. Connections between Phuket's Kathu temple and temples on mainland China are very weak. The main relationship is with a Chinese temple in Malaysia, which was founded in 1850 as an offshoot of the Kathu temple. This was only rediscovered in 1993, when the president of the Taiping temple in Malaysia traced its origins back to Phuket. Hence rather than homecoming being directed at hometowns in China, as standard overseas Chinese narratives state, here the centre is in Phuket (*Nangsue Thi Raruk Sanchao* 1996: 12; Author's interview with Chaiyooth Pinpradab, Vice President of the Kathu Temple, Phuket, 19 December 2000). Sino-Thai in Phuket are not pseudo-Chinese in need of re-education in Chineseness by the PRC, but a source of Chinese culture that is produced in relation to nodes of transnational activity in Southeast Asia.

Similar regional communities have been formed via petit bourgeois social clubs. Though the Rotary and Lions clubs both come from Chicago, they have a very loyal following in Southeast Asia, which is largely, if not exclusively, overseas Chinese. Like with schools and temples, most of the networking is not with China or Taiwan, but among neighbouring Southeast Asian nations (Author's interview with Officers of the Hokkien Association of Phuket, Phuket, 25 December 2000; Author's interview with Chaiyooth Pinpradab, Kathu, Phuket, 19 December 2000). Their solidarity is with compatriots in Malaysia and Indonesia. Even so, it is not like Thai neo-nationalism that looks to Mahathir as

an anti-Western ally. It was clear from interviews that the solidarity is with fellow ethnic Chinese who gather against a perceived Islamic threat exemplified by Malaysian and Indonesian society.

The Phuket experience shows how overseas Chinese still engage in transnational networks, often in conflict with the central government in Bangkok and neo-nationalist ideology. These transnational networks have grown out of a Nanyang Chinese economic-culture fostered by the British empire, which persists in postcolonial Southeast Asia. But as the major civic institutions of Phuket – the Chinese school, the temple and the petit bourgeois social clubs – show, these networks are not closely linked with China. Rather they are involved in transnational microcircuits of education, pilgrimage and conventioning within Southeast Asia, especially with Chinese communities just over the border in Malaysia. As they cross national borders, they produce new communities not just in distinction to states, but as part of a relation of Chinese and Islamic economic-cultures. Thus cosmopolitan Chinese groups in Phuket are not evidence of ‘third culture,’ that is independent of nationalisms. The diaspora takes on meaning in regional networks of economic-culture rather than in either homogeneous national communities or a coherent cosmopolitan culture.

### **Diasporic Chinese in Mahasarakham**

The Sino-Thai situation in the rural Northeastern province of Mahasarakham is in many ways the opposite of that in Phuket. It is involved in neither a national nor a transnational economic-culture, but as we will see it takes shape in relation to outsiders from other provinces. The community is small. It is one of the poorest provinces in the country. Though Chinese have been in the area for nearly two centuries – first settling in the neighbouring province of Roi-Et in 1836 – not much is going on in Mahasarakham. The Chinese school lasted only from 1944 to 1949 when it was shut down by the state. Clan associations are absent; interested Sino-Thai have to go to the closest city, Khon Kaen. Likewise for the Rotary and Lions clubs.<sup>16</sup>

The main ‘Chinese’ institution in province is called the Mahasarakham Association, and it was founded relatively recently in 1982. Unlike the Thai-Hua school in Phuket, this Association has not had to struggle for recognition from the state. Quite the opposite: it was the state that instructed the local Sino-Thai community to found the association to celebrate the Chakri dynasty’s bicentennial. Diasporic organisations thus were formed at the provincial level to legitimate royal nationalism. Interestingly, rather than anything of Chinese or Thai royal origins, the Chinese committee of Mahasarakham decided to name the association and its building after the province.

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<sup>16</sup> The sources used are: Niranam (1993: 9); author’s interview with Nareerat Parisuthiwuttiporn, History Lecturer at the University of Mahasarakham, Mahasarkham, 8 August 2001; author’s interview with Thasaanachan Phumiphan, Mahasarakham, 9 August 2001.

Unlike in Phuket, Mahasarakham is not part of any transnational network – except if you count the communist insurgency that raged in the region up into the 1980s, and was led by Sino-Thai. It would be hard to argue that Mahasarakham is even part of a national network since the railroad and super highway both by-pass the province. The most cosmopolitan aspect of the province is the University of Mahasarakham which forms a strong cultural centre for the community. (Phuket, with all its wealth and influence, still lacks a university.) Business in Mahasarakham, on the other hand, is local. It is almost exclusively trade and commerce: there is no industry in the province. The most prominent Sino-Thai owns the Toyota dealership. A past president of the Mahasarakham Association is a shopkeeper who sells picture frames. Sino-Thai business is generally represented by the Chamber of Commerce, which has the same membership as the Mahasarakham Association, i.e. it is ethnic Chinese. The diaspora's limited 'economic horizon' in Mahasarakham which focuses on trade rather than manufacturing is common among provincial business in Thailand's remote Northeastern region (see Nareerat 2000: 6 and Ueda 2000: 181).

Sino-Thai life, as with life in general in Mahasarakham, is best described as 'provincial' in both the geographical and the critical sense. The mission statement of the Mahasarakham Association underlines this:

The objectives of the association are: to be a meeting place for the Mahasarakham people, to create unity among the Mahasarakham people, to support secure jobs for Mahasarakham people, to be the intermediary between government officials and the people, and to promote education, sports, religion, and traditional customs (Niranam 1993: 12, 10).

Such provincial capitalism, which was dominated by Sino-Thai business, was one of the keys to the successful Thai political economy before 1997. But a recent controversy testifies to the parochial nature of the economic-culture in Mahasarakham as it is constructed in relation to outsiders. The Chamber of Commerce was up in arms because its members were being undersold by extra-provincial caravan traders. Competition from these outsiders was driving the Mahasarakham traders out of business; the outsiders' prices were lower because they did not have to pay local taxes.

Rather than promoting a transnational network and a liberal trade regime as in Phuket, Sino-Thai business in Mahasarakham organised demonstrations to protest against a national free market (author's interview, Thasaanachan Phumiphan, Mahasarakham, 9 August 2001). Globalisation was not the problem here, so much as any national economy – Sino-Thai business demanded that the provincial governor restrict inter-provincial trade and enforce a Mahasarakham mercantilism. The irony is that overseas Chinese used the caravan trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to penetrate markets in Northeastern Thailand. Such an anti-entrepreneurial attitude among the diasporic Chinese is one reason why Mahasarakham is not as prosperous as its neighbours. Sino-Thai in Mahasarakham are wary of investing money, and prefer to deposit it in banks –

none of which is based in the province (author's interview, Thavesilp Subwattana, History Professor, University of Mahasarakham, Mahasarakham, 10 August 2001).

Sino-Thai in Mahasarakham thus show how diasporic Chinese adapt to local economic-culture. In this way, they are the only diasporic Chinese outside Bangkok interviewed by the author in Thailand who correspond with Bangkok's neo-nationalist mercantilism thematically, if not in terms of content. They see outsiders as immoral competition, and wish to construct and guard economic borders. They complain that the system is unfair, and see the problem as more political than economic. The government – in this case, the governor and mayor – is either not strong enough to defend their interests, or has shown its corrupt nature by selling out the province to outsiders. The province is an economic backwater – even when compared with its neighbour Roi-Et, let alone Bangkok or Phuket – and successful overseas Chinese traders reflect this very narrow view of business. Rather than being evidence of an invisible empire of diasporic Chinese entrepreneurs who constitute the third largest economy in the world, or of a neo-national economic-culture, this group of businessmen is simply trying to keep the caravan traders out. Once, again, the diaspora is necessary for producing economic and cultural borders in Mahasarakham. Its community takes shape against the mobile and flexible capitalism of the extra-provincial caravan traders.

These three ethnographies demonstrate the diversity of Sino-Thai experience – sometimes national, other times transnational, and still others provincial – and how it is formed in distinction to a set of Others: for example, anti-Indonesian in Bangkok, anti-Muslim in Phuket and anti-caravan trader in Mahasarakham. But we can generalise from this analysis. In all three sites, Sino-Thai are not at the periphery of either Thai or Chinese economic-culture. They are not the sojourners of old who defined themselves in terms of China's standards of civilisation. Rather these groups are busy networking for three particular forms of capitalism: international, transnational and provincial.

Rather than being flexible and mobile, as Nonini and Ong argue, these three ethnographies show how the diaspora is flexible but not necessarily mobile. Thus research which points to the fluid cosmopolitanism of diaspora only applies to the limited case of wealthy 'transnational yuppies.' Rather than being a transformative force for a new style of capitalism, diasporic Chinese adapt to particular contexts. They are very successful at colonising particular economic-cultures: inter/national capitalism in Bangkok, transnational capitalism in Phuket and provincial capitalism in Mahasarakham. They are not nationalist in Phuket or Mahasarakham simply because the inter/national economic opportunities are concentrated in the Bangkok area; they are less cosmopolitan in Bangkok than expected for the same reason. As Wang Gungwu stated for diasporic Chinese in Malaysia, the locality is not longer in southern China, but in rural Malaysia (Wang 2001: 2). But this sense of locality does not mean that the Chinese communities are autonomous as Wang suggests, or ungrounded as Nonini and Ong argue; this section has shown how they are relational on many grounds.

Diaspora are the not pure agency of mobile capital, but flexibly respond to specific economic-cultural contexts.

## **CONCLUSION**

Globalisation does not simply describe a process whereby Western capitalism and American popular culture dominate the world, and erode both state sovereignty and local culture. This essay has shown how Chinese capitalism and culture have been key in building borders and producing communities. But rather than substituting 'Chinese' for 'American' to describe this process, I have used diaspora to question popular understandings of the global versus the local to argue that cosmopolitanism and nationalism produce each other. Hence, the diaspora not only loosens any essential link between nation and state, but also illuminates the informal politics of the relation between the global and the local.

The body of this paper argued two interrelated points, both of which highlight the dynamic interaction between Chinese, Thai and Sino-Thai identity construction, on the one hand, and the mutual production of domestic and international politics, on the other. Though diasporic Chinese capitalism is often figured as a peculiarly Asian form of globalisation which erodes national borders in Southeast Asia, I have shown how diasporic populations are intimately involved in defining borders. Firstly, neo-nationalism in China and Thailand share much of the same logic and images: a highly territorialised identity, an economic-cultural understanding of neo-imperialism, and an Othering of the West. Both have a strong notion of national humiliation, loss and grievance which relies on a foreign/domestic dynamic: foreign invasion aided by domestic stupidity and corruption. Both have used diasporic Chinese as a resource to construct a nationalist self and a foreign Other. Though Thai nationalism has been constructed against a Chinese Other in the past, now neo-nationalism not only includes Sino-Thai, but also is largely formulated by them. Yet fieldwork shows how many in the provinces still figure Thai nationalism as an anti-Chinese activity, and are suspicious about neo-nationalism's morality and practicality.

Secondly, the paper questioned how nationalism and cosmopolitanism are formulated by arguing against the popular notion of diasporic Chinese as a cosmopolitan community. The ethnographies both added to and problematised critical considerations of the Chinese diaspora by examining the diversity of Chineseness as it is articulated in different economic-cultural spaces in Thailand. Fieldwork in Bangkok, Phuket and Mahasarakham demonstrates that Chinese populations do not simply constitute a third culture. Though internally coherent to people in Bangkok, Phuket and Mahasarakham, each ethnography calls the others into question, adding to our critical view of national identity. Diaspora thus both constructs and deconstructs the seemingly opposing forces of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Indeed, these communities tend to colonise identity formation in various local economic-cultures. In Bangkok, they are national nodes for inter/national activity. In Phuket, they are transnational nodes for regional activity. In Mahasarakham they are provincial centres for mercantile capitalism.

Though this could be described as an assimilation to local culture, none of the three economic-cultures corresponds with cultural nationalism in general or Thai neo-nationalism in particular. Localism here is quite different from the neo-nationalist utopia of the Thai Buddhist community. Rather, diasporic Chinese are involved in colonising the prevailing economic-culture, be it national, transnational or provincial. It is noteworthy that on the one hand, many of the Bangkok elite who write neo-nationalist manifestos are Sino-Thai, and on the other a provincial diasporic Chinese institution is called the 'Mahasarakham' Association. A sociological approach which examined national identity in terms of norms and institutions would have missed this economic-cultural dynamic.

The third argument of this paper thus has been theoretical. One obvious conclusion could be that the diversity of diasporic economic-cultures evades generalisation in a curious combination of empiricism (theory is unnecessary because the facts speak for themselves) and relativism (deconstruction shows that anything goes). Neither is the argument of this paper. Quite the opposite: generalisations are possible, but we have to look in different places for a new set of problems and solutions. To understand how nationalism and cosmopolitanism, the global and the local work, we need to see how the outsiders – in this case, the diaspora – are necessary for constructing communities and producing boundaries. Diaspora thus are not just an economic resource, but also a symbolic resource in the economic-cultures of cosmopolitanism, nationalism and localism.

To argue this, I have had to push beyond the sociological turn of Constructivism, which uses identity and norms to fill the cultural gap left by economic approaches. Though there are overlaps between a sociological and an anthropological approach – just as there are between the rationalism of neo-realism and neo-liberalism, the differences are important. By focusing research on the search for culture variables, Constructivism is unable to get beyond the assimilation/multiculturalism debate that animates diaspora studies. A sociological approach, for example, might look for common norms of Asian Values to explain the congruence of Chinese and Thai neo-nationalism. But rather than looking to culture as a substance which has content, the anthropological approach highlights how culture takes shape in context-sensitive relations between identity and difference. What China and Thailand share is not a common identity, but a common set of differences – in this case, diasporic Chinese and Western imperialism – against which their particular national identities are constructed. By shifting the research agenda from norms to relations, an anthropological approach is better able to consolidate an anti-essentialist view of identity and account for transnational politics.

Since identities are produced by relations of exclusion in specific contexts, to understand other neo-nationalisms we need to look at how they are formed by other diasporas. It is necessary to see how the Islamic diaspora in Europe, for example, sparks neo-nationalism in France, England, the Netherlands, and so on. But, as this essay's empirical evidence has shown, diaspora are not simply an 'ethnic problem.' They are key in the construction and deconstruction of the seemingly opposite ideologies of nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

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