On the Edge of Empires:

Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora

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Orientalisms, Multiple Inscriptions, and Overseas Chinese

I was born into a Straits Chinese family in colonial Malaya, and educated in a British missionary school. I have lived half my life in the United States, equally divided between New York and the San Francisco Bay Area. The rest of my family is scattered in three continents. Every year, I spend time with my extended family in Southeast Asia. This sketch of a life shaped by cultural hybridity and a plurality of terrains can serve as an example of the multiply inscribed identity of Overseas Chinese. Writing from such a “decentered consciousness” (Said 1985, 14) and against the grain of hegemonic notions about “Chinese” and “Asians,” I hope to argue for an understanding of minority identity formation in intersecting national and transnational political arenas (see Vincent 1984).1

A post-Orientalist interpretive position must first seek to deconstruct
Orientalism as a knowledge/power system (Foucault 1991). Orientalism has proliferated into many complex discourses that shape the conditions of existence and possibilities for Asian subjects, both in their homelands and abroad. In this era of Pacific Rim affluence, I argue that what might be called the grand Orientalist discourses, those which reached supreme authority under the British empire, are still effective if not inseparable from late-capitalist Asian development. Grand Orientalist discourses are dialectically linked to an alternative terrain of petty Orientalisms that are generated in the transnational contexts of corporate and media circulation and that rework Anglo-European academic concepts into confident pronouncements about Oriental labor, skills, deference, and mystery. In contrast to Said's (1978) assumption that the objects of Orientalisms cannot respond, this essay argues that Asian subjects selectively participate in Orientalist formulations as they negotiate shifting discursive terrains in the world economy.

Such discursive interventions disturb the dissemination of knowledges in the West, and represent a strategy of power that cannot be reduced to a reproduction of the subjects themselves as Orientalists. In non-Western circuits of economy and power, they intervene in other cultural productions of Chinese identity (see Ong 1993). Cosmopolitan and affluent Asians therefore have the material and symbolic resources to express a complex agency in manipulating global schemes of cultural difference, racial hierarchy, and citizenship. They can use Orientalist codings of their human capital worth to make strategic choices of citizenship that do not inhibit their business activities worldwide or threaten the economic and political security of their families.

As postcolonial subjects, in a situational if not in a formally political sense, Overseas Chinese are often embroiled in what may be characterized as a “promiscuous relationship” with the ruling power: a “convivial tension” arising from wining and dining with the cultural Other on the one hand, but fraught with the symbolic violence of political inequality and mutual distrust on the other (Mbembe 1992, 5). In diaspora, Chinese subjects are inscribed in the same epistemological field of power as Western officials and corporate interests, and in sharing references in common, “a logic of both distancing and domesticity is at work” (13). Cosmopolitan Chinese, ever conscious of their own image as the cultural Other in the
West, negotiate, circumvent, or take advantage of Orientalist images that inform citizenship requirements and transnational capitalism.

This essay explores how Overseas Chinese (mainly from Hong Kong) are variously constructed as citizens on the edge of empires—China, Britain, the United States—and investigates the subjects' own complicity in and subversion of these constructions. Citizenship is considered here as an effect of state instrumentality, a productive discursive power, and as social practice. First, I will contrast British and Chinese citizenship policies in relationship to political, economic, and biopolitical (Foucault 1991) interests, and how they are mediated by assumptions of racial and cultural worth. Next, I will consider how diaspora Chinese negotiate these varying requirements of belonging through complex strategies of maneuvers in political, spatial, and affective relationships. These strategies of emigration and flexible citizenship are thoroughly infused by Orientalisms, and yet the practices themselves indicate an instrumentality that belies Orientalist claims of communalism or family unity. Finally, I will discuss how Asian American images are appropriated and transformed by new Chinese immigrants narrating cosmopolitan citizenship in the United States. As postcolonial transnational subjects, they call into question not only stability in cultural identity, but also ties to a single nation-state, or even to a single imagined community.

**English Weather: National Character and Biopolitics of Citizenship**

Since the 1960s, Overseas Chinese from Hong Kong, but also from throughout Southeast Asia, often seek residential rights in Western countries to escape current and anticipated political discrimination and upheavals that are considered detrimental to their businesses and family security. Increasingly, with the rising affluence of Asian countries and relatively declining economies in the West, their search for both economic opportunities and political refuge may not be found in the same place, or region of the world. With the impending return of Hong Kong to mainland China rule in 1997, many Chinese entrepreneurs and professionals would like to continue working in Hong Kong and China, but have their families installed in safe havens in Australia, Canada, the United States, and Great Britain.
However, they soon find that their search for overseas citizenship is at once volitional in terms of individual strategies and constrained by the national policy of the host country.

The contours of citizenship in advanced capitalist countries are represented by the passport, the regulatory instrument of residence, travel, and belonging. Citizenship requirements are an instrument of governmental biopolitics (Foucault 1991), which regulates the conduct of subjects as a population, and as individuals (in terms of their sexual and reproductive behavior) in the interests of ensuring security and prosperity for the nation-state as a whole. Under liberal democracy, biopolitical regulation (‘governmentality’) helps construct and ensure the needs of the marketplace, through a philosophy of acting and not acting (Gordon 1991, 17). For instance, in Hong Kong, British liberal government has always been poised on a boundary between government action and necessary inaction in the marketplace, in order to ensure the flourishing of the wide-open capitalist economy. Thus, the question of Hong Kong Chinese emigration to Great Britain must be seen as situated within the dialectical links between governmentality and transnational capitalism.

In Hong Kong, residents are designated “British-Dependent Territory Citizens” (BDTC) in the remnant corner of the empire, with limitless rights of travel but no rights to reside in Great Britain. When Hong Kong reverts to mainland China rule, these same residents will be called “British Nationals (Overseas)” (BNO), with the conditions of domicile and travel unchanged. Hong Kong Chinese are thus normalized as an overseas population that is in but not of the empire: their partial citizenship rests on differences: of territoriality, coloniality, and (unmentioned) non-British origins.

In Britain, immigration policy is at the threshold of structurally determining the relationship between class and race, so that a phenotypical variation in skin color is transformed into social stratification based on the assumed capital and labor potential of different groups of immigrants. Postwar immigration laws institutionalized racial difference through the progressive exclusion of “colored” immigrants from the Commonwealth (Miles 1989, 84–85). In the early 1960s, under public pressure to restrict “colored” immigration (said to overwhelm housing and state benefits), the
Conservative Government withdrew the right of “colored” United Kingdom passport holders to enter Britain. A few years later, the same government granted the right of entry and settlement to several million “white” people from South Africa. Such action was defended by a government White Paper which maintained that expanded Commonwealth immigration creates social tensions; the immigrant presence thus has to be resolved if “the evil of racial strife” is to be avoided (85–86). Although the language of immigration law is not explicitly racist, the distinction between whites and coloreds from the Commonwealth, and their assumed differential contribution to racial tensions (“race” is frequently used to mean only coloreds, not whites), clearly reproduces a class hierarchy whereby race is given concrete institutional expression.

In this transnational discursive formation of race, Chinese from Hong Kong are coloreds, yet clearly differentiated from Afro-Caribbean immigrants because of their significant role in overseas capitalism and their perceived docility under British rule in Hong Kong. In the 1960s, restrictions of immigration from Commonwealth countries limited Hong Kong emigrants mainly to restaurant operators and employees (Watson 1975, 50–78). In addition, thousands of students were sent by their parents for higher education in Britain. By the 1980s, fear of the imminent reversion to China rule and its potential threat to the Hong Kong economy generated a steady emigration stream, mainly to Western countries. Soon the monthly outflow of Hong Kongers had reached one thousand, thus jeopardizing the reputation of the Hong Kong financial market, in which British interests were heavily invested. The colonial government defined the problem as one of “brain drain,” and fought to stem the outflow by appealing to Orientalist reason. One official commented:

The [Chinese] have an overwhelming pragmatic concern for family and personal development—the same pragmatic self-interest that has made the Hong Kong economy so successful.2

Immigration law was modified to grant citizenship to some Hong Kong immigrants, mainly as a symbolic gesture to stem the outflow and stabilize the Hong Kong economy. Again, citizenship was awarded according to perceived biotypical criteria that would serve market interests. In 1990, a
nationality bill granted full citizenship or “the right of abode” to only fifty thousand elite Hong Kongers and their families (about one-quarter of a million out of a total population of 5.7 million in Hong Kong). This special subcategory of Chinese is carefully chosen from among householders (presumably predominantly male) who have British connections in government, business, or some other organization. A point system for different occupations like accountancy and law discriminates among the applicants, who must have a higher education and presumably speak fluent English. They are mainly in the thirty-to-forty-years-of-age bracket, and are thus selected for their capacity to be normalized as British citizens and their ability to participate in the generation of transnational wealth.

Thus British immigration law creates a new ideological discourse on Overseas Chinese, who are eligible for citizenship only as *homo economicus*. Although the British Labour Party criticized the bill’s “elitist” emphasis on the immigrants’ educational and professional backgrounds, it did not address the larger subject of racism, and how the interests of transnational capitalism can appropriate Orientalist discourse for its own purposes. Although yet to be fully implemented, the new nationality law constructs a different “legal subjectivity of citizenship” for Chinese already in the country.

Bhabha has noted that the English weather invokes the “most changeable and immanent signs of national character” and is implicitly contrasted to its “daemonic double”: the hot, tropical landscapes of the former colonies. English weather represents an imagined national community under threat of “the return of the diasporic, the postcolonial” (1990, 327). Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, anxious to quiet a restive public over the admission of more coloreds into the “bless’d isle,” defended her bill in Parliament by wondering why the Chinese would trade sunny Hong Kong for Great Britain, “a cold and cloudy island.” She reminded the British that the nationality bill was intended as an “insurance policy” to keep the would-be Chinese citizens in Hong Kong up to and beyond 1997. In other words, full British citizenship for even those Chinese meeting the biopolitical criteria is citizenship indefinitely deferred; the nationality law operates as an insurance against their ever becoming full British citizens. It was clear that a cold welcome awaits them.
China Recalls Prodigal Sons

It is precisely that strategy of British national capitalism that China seeks to combat through controlling the Chinese population. Although Hong Kong is situated in China, the subjects are in spirit Overseas Chinese (huaqiao or huayi). Starting with the great South China diaspora at the turn of the century, China was stereotypically perceived as the mother “civilization-state” by generations of Chinese sojourners abroad (Tu 1991). This notion of nationality based on birth and family, or flesh and bones (Cant, kwut-yoke), cuts across political borders, so that all Overseas Chinese, wherever they reside, are in an informal sense expected to give loyal support to the motherland. Citizenship, then, is constructed first and foremost as cultural belonging.

This sense of imagined cultural homeland has gained new resonance over the past decade, as Hong Kong has been the catalyst of a capitalist boom across the waters in Guangdong Province. Hong Kong and other Overseas Chinese have led capitalist investments in South China, setting up thousands of factories and creating jobs for millions on the mainland (Guldin 1992). Citing “capitalism with Chinese characteristics,” Premier Deng has proclaimed the goal of creating a string of Hong Kongs along the China coast, to emulate the Newly Industrializing Countries or NIC model of capitalist development. In China, Hong Kong Chinese are viewed as capital-bearers, but also as modern pacesetters who expose local folk to international standards of taste and modern life (Guldin 1992).

Even before the tidal wave of emigration (zhongguo chao) following the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, China tried to stem the exodus of Chinese capital and professionals from Hong Kong. Through its mouthpiece, the New China News Agency office in Hong Kong, the People’s Republic repeatedly appealed to all Hong Kongers who have gone abroad to reconsider their decision, to “come back, to work for the prosperity of the land of [your] birth.” An official blamed the flight of Hong Kong Chinese on the instrumental ethos bred under Western influence. He charged that Chinese residents have been led astray by capitalist countries offering investment opportunities to attract Hong Kong skill and capital.³ China viewed the British nationality act as an insult to Chinese sovereignty, and a shameless
attempt by Britain to cream off Hong Kong’s talent. It threatened the expulsion of those who possess full British citizenship after 1997.4

Mainland China is thus fighting to retain Hong Kong capitalists and professionals to help modernize its economy. While the Chinese government takes a paternalistic tone with errant capitalists who would be “forgiven” for seeking citizenship overseas, those “prodigal sons” (dubbed by the British press)5 who return are contrasted with the traitors who would abandon capitalism in China altogether.6 While China appeals to filial piety and capitalist opportunities to retain Hong Kong subjects, Britain holds out the promise of citizenship and democratic rights, thereby hoping to ensure a place for British interests in the Pacific Rim economies.

Since China, through capitalism, is fast developing into the greatest industrial region in the world, and the British economy is in decline, many emigrant Chinese have opted to work in China, while seeking citizenship outside both countries altogether. Caught between British disciplinary racism and Chinese opportunistic filial claims, between declining capitalism in Britain and surging capitalism in Asia, diaspora Chinese seek a flexible position among the myriad possibilities (and problems) found in the global sphere. Just as big Hong Kong companies seek tax havens in places like Bermuda, middle-class Chinese obtain passports not only from Canada, Australia, Singapore, and the United States, but also from revenue-poor Fiji, the Philippines, Panama, and Tonga (which required in return a downpayment of U.S. $200,000 and another equal amount in installments).7 A small industry has sprung up to disseminate information about the different legal requirements and economic incentives for obtaining citizenship abroad, giving rise to business scams like the one which offers, for a downpayment of U.S. $5,000, citizenship in a fictitious Pacific Ocean island called Corterra. More well heeled emigrants may seek out remote places, safe havens that will yield up a passport for very little commitment in return. A Hong Kong entrepreneur confides that his brother is a good friend of the king of Tonga, who gave him citizenship in return for a major investment. A political refuge secured, his brother continues to operate the family’s multinational real estate business out of Hong Kong, managing properties in both England and China, without needing their citizenship papers.
To Overseas Chinese, then, for whom the meanings of motherland, country, and family have for a long time been discontinuous and even contradictory, legal citizenship is sought not necessarily in the place of business or work, but in places where the family can make their American dream and enjoy a secure bourgeois lifestyle, or where world-class education can be found for the children, and real estate for bored housewives to speculate in. What does this tell us about emigrant Chinese and their modern subjectivity?

**Overseas Chinese: Family Biopolitics and Flexible Citizenship**

I will here discuss the evolution of that stratum of upper middle-class and upper-class diaspora Chinese who have the resources to negotiate and exploit the varied conditions of commerce and family residence in China, Britain, and other countries. The birth of a modern sensibility among diasporic Chinese emerged from the proliferation of Chinese family enterprises under European colonial rule, a historical juncture that broke apart traditional links between Chinese subjects and the Chinese state, and redirected Confucian filiality to the task of wealth accumulation by spatially dispersed families. Flexibility in family strategies in a global economy has had important consequences for their subjective experience of citizenship in metropolitan countries.

I use the term “Overseas Chinese modernity” to refer to the pragmatic everyday practices (Rabinow 1989, 9–10) that have developed in relation to colonial rule, modernity, and global capitalism. These norms and forms of reason are specifically about relations within the family (jia), between the family and the economy, and between the family and the state (guojia). In colonial Asia, the compulsory hard work associated with the impoverished Chinese peasantry from whom many Overseas Chinese are descended was transmuted, by the rigors and exploitation of colonial capitalism (whether in the jungles of Malaya or in the crammed workshops of Hong Kong) and cutthroat commercial competitiveness, into the daily norms of hard work, discipline, and pragmatism that one might find in any besieged immigrant community. However, such pragmatism associated with the survival of an ethnic minority has been cast in Orientalist terms and cannot be considered inseparable from them. Overseas Chinese modernity thus emerged in the
context of a Chinese capitalism and Orientalist regimes established along
the China coast and in parts of Southeast Asia.9

In nineteenth-century China, the Confucian ideology of filial piety (xiào) governed the relations of superior and subordinate (father/son, husband/wife, older/younger brother) and was extended to relations between subjects and the state (Yang 1988, 416; Barlow 1991). As the century proceeded, the growth of a European market economy undermined Confucian hegemony, especially in the Treaty Ports, the sites of European imperialism and mercantile capitalism.10 Among the new commercial and professional classes, loyalty to the modern nation-state (founded 1911) was barely developed, and the detested colonial power was viewed as an alien power that could be tolerated as long as money could be made.

Thus, at the level of everyday practice, the Chinese comprador class partially rejected loyalty to the Confucian state, and instead prized an alternative route to upward mobility by becoming the merchants who amassed wealth through transregional networks. In these circumstances, the notion of filial piety (xiào) to the larger social order collapsed. Among Overseas Chinese in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, paternal filiality enabled family enterprises to remain economically and morally connected across spatially dispersed locations.11 In the growing number of wealthy families, the Confucian father-son relationship has been transformed into the central relationship for family security and property accumulation in the transnational capitalist world.

The Hong Kong Chinese experience of modernity has also been shaped by the nineteenth-century British mercantilist philosophies of the nonintervening state and maximum freedom in the marketplace, where wealth can be pursued “with flexibility and vigor” (Chen 1984, 3–4). Up until the Tiananmen crackdown, the Chinese considered themselves sojourners/refugees and developed little sense of national identity with Hong Kong as a nation. Hong Kong Chinese experience political freedom as a marketplace phenomenon, and perceive citizenship as the right to promote familial interests and economic gain with no sense of obligation to society at large (72). The pervasiveness of material values and the instrumental approach to all facets of social life are key components of the modern consciousness. The fashioning of self is thus almost totally expressed through the power of
personal choice, risk-taking, and flexibility in the local marketplace and, increasingly, in the global economy. A Hong Kong government employee confides:

I don’t think I need to associate myself with a particular nation-state. I would rather not confine myself to a nationality definition by China or the U.K. I am a Hong Kong person, I grew up there, my family and friends are there, it’s where I belong. . . . I lack [a sense] of political belonging due to the British colonial system, but we have thrived in or on the system, in terms of the quality of life, roughly fair competition, in terms of moving up through the educational system even though Hong Kong is not a democracy.

Like many of his friends, he plans to get British citizenship but will probably order his life according to the economic opportunities offered by Hong Kong, China, or wherever he finds it rewarding to practice his talents. In contrast to the legal definition of citizenship, this narrative reflects the subject’s self-positioning and social agency in a cosmopolitan context. This social understanding of citizenship—an entitlement to make a living with a minimum of controls, taxes, or political responsibility, and the chance to compete for success in life—informsthe everyday consciousness of Hong Kongers.

Thus disengaged from any positive ideological links to the nation-state, diasporic Chinese place their faith in the family and personal relationships (guanxi) rather than in the government.12 The modernity of Chinese subjects is shaped within a politics of family which is partially constituted by the colonial or postcolonial state and yet which subverts it. Among the upwardly striving, what might be called “family biopolitics” refers to a set of rational practices that regulate healthy, productive bodies, and their deployment in flexible capitalist activities. Under British rule and in the extremely crowded, competitive conditions of laissez-faire capitalism, Hong Kong families, from the poorest (Liu 1990) to the wealthiest (Pan 1990, 364–367), have developed extraordinary discipline and control over family members in order to improve family livelihood and wealth.

Family biopolitics constitutes the subjects’ sense of moral worth in terms of relations within the family. New kinds of self-discipline in education, work, and consumption foster the steady accumulation of economic and
symbolic values (Bourdieu 1987) that contribute to family prosperity and honor. The term “utilitarianistic familialism” has been applied to the normative and practical tendencies whereby Hong Kong Chinese place family interests above all other individual and social concerns (Lau 1983, 72). Economic interdependence is the basic structuring principle of the family group (Canyut-ga-yan or “all-in-the-family”), which is a fluid collection of the nuclear family, with relatives and fictive kin who share common economic interests (72–74). Persistent endurance and income-making activities are basic qualities that measure self-worth in the eyes of the family, since the possession of these values enables family emancipation from poverty and political persecution. Unlike pre-1949 China, social status is derived almost solely from wealth accumulation, regardless of how it has been achieved (95–96).

Diasporic Chinese family biopolitics must be seen as discontinuous with the biopolitical agenda of the nation-state. Despite attempts by host countries to regulate the productive activities of diaspora Chinese populations, family biopolitics and the elasticity in pursuing wealth-making opportunities in diverse places continue, where possible, to escape state control. Power, then, is not perceived as organizing a social base along class, ethnic, or political lines, but as a personal capacity to acquire commodities and achieve higher status. The likes of Li Ka-shing and Sir Y. K. Pao, who rose from poverty to immense wealth, are considered the most brilliant realization of such radically apolitical, entrepreneurial maneuverings in the global arena.

In prominent Overseas Chinese family businesses (those with assets of a few hundred million U.S. dollars), the family head is usually the founder of the business. Either a grandparent or (more likely) the father, who became wealthy after amassing a fortune in the Hong Kong real estate market, tightly controls both family and business relations and, over his lifetime, gradually passes management and financial control to his sons. Confucian relational ethics invest sons and daughters-in-law with particular roles and obligations, making them amenable to the biopolitical agenda of the family firm. A middle-aged tycoon, Alex Leong (pseudonym), tells me:

I remember, even when I was in junior high, my objective was to follow my father's footsteps and be in business . . . to take over the family busi-
ness rather than try to work for someone else or do my own thing. Because I think it is very important for sons to carry on the family business, something that has been built up by your father. To me that is the number one obligation. . . . If your family has a business, why would you go work for somebody else, and leave a hired man to look after your family business? To me that doesn’t make any sense.

Alex comes from a very prominent family, which he traces back to a granduncle who was the governor of Guangdong Province. His father was educated in Germany, but after the Communist victory in 1949, the family sought political refuge in Australia. His father then decided to explore business opportunities in Brazil, where the family lived for a few years. They finally returned to Hong Kong, where his father soon went into real estate and set up a company called “Universe Enterprises.” The strong imprint of xiao obligation on Alex and his three brothers is reflected in their separate roles within the family firm’s transnational operations. Alex explains that the division of management and the spatial division of sons’ roles is very common among his generation of middle-aged men who are taking over the running of family firms:

The fathers make a very clear subdivision whereby one brother doesn’t infringe on the others, fearing that there would be too much fighting among them. For example, right now, my oldest brother works in Hong Kong. I take care of everything here [in San Francisco]. We always talk, but we know whose responsibility it is here and over there.

In another family, the eldest son remains at the headquarters of the family’s worldwide hotel industry, managing business in the Pacific Rim region, while the second brother manages the North American and European branches, and the youngest son, who came on board later, is managing their family interests in southern California. Daughters, no matter how well qualified, are never put in positions of management in the family firm; they are passive shareholders. In the San Francisco Bay Area, only three Hong Kong women are major executives of family businesses, but they are operating their own companies using seed money from their fathers. Their businesses are not in any way tied to their brothers’ family estate. Alex
refers to such a female investor as “one of the men,” indicating that wealth formation should not be women’s primary role.

Although Alex cannot imagine doing something else, he confesses that sometimes he felt “stifled” by his role as son and successor to his father’s business:

When you have a father as a boss, that to me is a double boss, right? You can’t just say I don’t agree, I quit and resign. . . . You can’t just walk away from your father. And then a father who has been in business for so long, he’ll never recognize you as an equal, so you are always in a subordinate position.

His youngest brother graduated from college years ago but, having observed the older brothers’ predicament, has resisted working in his father’s company. The young man is expressing his rebellion by working in a bank, but under the paternalistic eye of one of his father’s wealthy friends. Indeed, Alex anticipates that “eventually, when my youngest brother joins in, it is our objective to continue to expand here in the U.S. and wind down in Hong Kong.” Although some scholars have argued that a father who has inherited the family estate rather than acquired it enjoys more power over his sons (Sung 1981), among self-made Chinese tycoons, the patriarch appears to control his sons throughout his lifetime, because of his store of wealth and business experiences. In Alex’s family, the father has been retired for years now, but the sons are required to consult him on major selling and buying decisions.

Thus, the subjective masculinity of this very cosmopolitan family is defined primarily in terms of one’s role as a son, and success in contributing to the wealth accumulation of the family of origin, to which one’s jia is economically fused. Unlike daughters, who would inherit a smaller share of the family wealth than sons (30 to 70 percent, in Alex’s family), sons must be active in the running of the family business. To be merely a passive recipient is to play a feminine role, like his sisters, who marry out, or his wife, who is not supposed to involve herself in her husband’s family business, but to focus on producing heirs and providing for a warm and supportive family life. In families without sons, sons-in-law, even “foreign devils” (Cant, gweilo), who have been carefully groomed within the family business, can
succeed to manage different branches of the family company, as in the case of Sir Y. K. Pao, the late shipping and hotel magnate. Two of his Caucasian sons-in-law have inherited management of the family's vast corporate business.

In the 1960s, middle- and upper middle-class teenage boys like Alex applied to U.S. high schools and colleges for further education. Alex's father always told him, "Your future is really going to be outside Hong Kong. So you should be educated outside, as long as you maintain some Chinese customs and speak Chinese." An entire generation embarked on a transnational strategy of seeking overseas education, thus acquiring foreign "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1987) that would eventually facilitate their maneuvers in different cultural economies (see Ong 1992). Wealthy families often use their sons' education abroad, especially in England and in North America, as an entrée into the foreign country. Parents visit to buy homes for the children and to set up bank accounts. Upon graduation, the sons open up a foreign branch of the parent company. For instance, after graduating from Berkeley and the University of Wisconsin business school, Alex joined his father's company by setting up the San Francisco office. Because Alex is not yet a citizen, his parents plan to retire eventually in Vancouver, in Canada, where residential rights can be more easily obtained than in the U.S. Wherever it is located, the family firm operates as the vehicle par excellence for flexible accumulation, that is, the deployment of innovative financial instruments that allow flexible twenty-four-hour responses to a highly uncertain, competitive global capitalism (Harvey 1989, 147–159).

Through this mix of individual and family cultural strategies, Chinese entrepreneurs widen the social field of operation to the global arena, thereby attempting to subvert and elude the regulation of particular nation-states.

Over the past ten years, many families and their businesses have come to straddle the Pacific coasts, and a common pattern is to establish family residences in two countries and to shuttle frequently between them. Thus, in diaspora, the role of the wife and daughter-in-law has evolved into one of maintaining a far-flung family network. While the filial son concentrates on accumulating educational and economic capital, his wife and their children are acquiring educational and cultural capital in places like the San
Francisco Bay Area. Ideally, the scion of a major company should have children, but it is no longer necessary to have more than four, and quite acceptable to have only daughters (Sir Y. K. Pao and his wife have four daughters). The daughter-in-law is chosen to be a good companion for her husband in his public life, but her main role is to manage a home environment conducive to education. She makes sure the children excel at school, take Chinese-language classes, and grow up to be well-rounded professionals (for girls, there are piano lessons and ballet, for boys tennis and basketball, sometimes violin lessons). She cultivates *guanxi* relations to enhance “face” values, and build up relations of reciprocity, obligation, and indebtedness among other immigrant Chinese. Although much of her leisure time may be taken up in mah-jongg and tennis, many Chinese women obtain a real estate license so that they can earn income of their own. Down the San Francisco peninsula, a majority of real estate agents are Overseas Chinese women selling family homes to other immigrant Chinese. A Chinese industrialist based in the Silicon Valley area tells me he has moved about five times over a period of sixteen years because his wife kept on trading up in the local housing market. The modern expatriate woman thus enters into wealth accumulation, building up her own family’s nest egg while her husband continues to work for his father’s far-flung family business. Because finding and buying homes is deeply associated with female domestic responsibility, especially in the context of family relocation, wives working in residential real estate are not discouraged, as long as their income-generating activities are ideologically constructed as secondary to their roles as wife and mother.

In diaspora, women are constructed as doubly different citizens. Citizenship is implicitly encoded as masculine; frequently, the legal status of women is obtained through their links to men, and immigration laws in most countries implicitly define the desired immigrant as a capital-bearing man with his family. Women also have few rights as managers and inheritors in the family of their birth. However, Hong Kong women have used their bodies to circumvent the legal and economic gender bias of overseas citizenship. Rather than rely on their husbands to get them overseas, thousands of women give birth abroad, thus obtaining foreign passports for their children and “insurance” for their own future. (One Hong Kong bank
even offered “pregnancy perks” for female executives or wives of managerial staff who gave birth overseas, in order to limit the resignation of workers.)13 They in effect create a “uterine family/citizenship,” bypassing the regulations of the nation-state and of the neo-Confucian norms at the same time.

Businessmen are sometimes referred to as “astronauts” (Cant, tai hong yan) because they are constantly “in orbit,” caught between the desires to establish family residency abroad and to make money in Hong Kong (fig. 1). In protest, wives of executives who shuttle across the Pacific have referred to themselves as “widows,” seeking solace in mah-jongg parties. Thus cultural strategies to mesh individual and family interests, capital maximization, and family unity have ironically contributed to family dispersal and even fragmentation.

The “astronauts” looking for a landing pad14 is a Chinese trope of post-modern displacement. Flexible accumulation often separates the home and the workplace by national boundaries, producing a sense of deterritorialization that intensifies the search for local affective and business bonds. There has been a revival of the old practice among Chinese sojourners in Southeast Asia to acquire second wives. Many commuting businessmen are reported to have established mistresses either in the New Territories or in China. The slang expression “the mistress’s soup is [more] beautiful” (Cant, ah yee lang tong) celebrates the boss’s preference for his new mate and sometime agent in the new business locale. This process of relocalization through the establishment of familial ties in Asia thus further jeopardizes the formal kinship relationship with wives and children relocated to the West.15 Despite the acquisition of citizenship that will insure against an unstable future, flexible accumulation ironically may thus disrupt the reproduction of the family and its patrilineal connections to the family business. It would thus appear that self-Orientalist claims about the Chinese “affective model” of capitalism (Tai 1989) should be revised, since flexible accumulation is playing havoc with the personalistic and particularistic relations of family life.

Diaspora Chinese are confronted with another limitation, however. Because they have been positioned by, and have positioned themselves on, the edge of economic empires, Overseas Chinese must mediate shifting discursive constructions of their marginality in the United States.
Figure 1 A Chinese "astronaut" floating in space with lifelines to Hong Kong, Australia, and Canada. Reprinted with permission from the South China Morning Post, 20 March 1989.
Liberalism, Racism, and the American West

American neoliberalism, as heir to laissez-faire capitalism and its late twentieth-century elaboration, participates in the construction of civil society and the management of racially defined categories of citizens who are assumed to embody different kinds of economic value and political risks. Foucault (1991) notes that the liberal conception of civil society must be understood as an instrument of governmental technology; it is a space within which *homo economicus* must be positioned in order to be made adequately manageable. As in Britain, American liberalism intersects with racial ideology in locating the politically inscribed differentiation of non-white groups within civil society.

Historically, immigration policy toward Asian immigrants has concerned itself with how Asian immigrants are to be positioned vis-à-vis other class and ethnic groups in civil society, and how they are to be disciplined and defined in relation to the changing political economy. From the mid-nineteenth century, California relied on Chinese immigrants to build its agriculture, railroad, mining, and service industries. Although white workers and their supporters considered the Chinese a degenerate race not fit to live alongside the white race, capitalists and missionaries welcomed them as cheap, diligent, and docile workers essential for industry to compete with East Coast and foreign businesses (Daniels 1988, 129–154). During the Cold War, the mainstream perception of the Chinese oscillated between the ideologically good Chinese, associated with the Chiang Kai-shek family, and the threatening communist image associated with "Red China" (301). However, the emergence of a middle-class Chinese population and its rise up the economic ladder contrasted with the "underclass," a term Gunnar Myrdal used to refer mainly to blacks, Chicanos, and other Hispanic Americans (184–185). In the 1960s, academics coined the term "model minority" to refer to Japanese Americans (319). The media quickly popularized the term, which is now generalized to include Chinese Americans, and celebrated those minorities who raised themselves up by their bootstraps, in contrast to "nonachieving" minorities like the African Americans and Hispanics. Thus Orientalist discourse constructed Asian-ness as the model or embodiment of the desired human capital of dili-
gence, docility, self-sufficiency, and productivity, and as a model to be emulated by other minorities.

Meanwhile, Chinese immigrants had evolved into two communities: urban working-class and suburban middle- and upper middle-class families. The 1962 liberalization of immigration laws allowed Chinese to enter the United States for the first time as families, bringing in the children of prewar immigrants who had spent years in Hong Kong awaiting the opportunity to depart for the United States. As Chinatown became revitalized with the influx of a new working class (Nee and Nee 19p), the college-educated children of earlier generations moved into white-collar professions outside Chinatown. These middle-class ranks swelled with the immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan, who arrived as students and professionals. This influx coincided with the postwar restructuring of the American economy and its increasing reliance on immigrant labor for its factories, as well as with the flow of foreign capital and talent into the high-tech and finance industries. The “model minority” construct, located within a larger racist discourse, came to define a particular kind of Asian citizen, and implicitly criticized other minorities who would be aided by the Great Society programs.17

Public discourse has since stressed the Asian immigrants’ embodiment of desired human capital.18 For instance, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown, a letter to the San Francisco Chronicle defends the admission of Chinese refugees:

The opportunity to welcome the best and the brightest of China and Hong Kong into our area is fantastic. These are motivated, energetic, courageous people with strong cultural traditions of taking care of their families, working hard and succeeding in business. We need more of these values in our midst, not less.19

Orientalist discourse now invokes “traditional American values” as embodied by Asians, ignoring the varieties of Asian immigrant groups differentiated by culture, gender, class, national origin, and length of residence in the United States. The recoding of Asians (from the earlier images of railroad worker, scab, laundryman, restaurant worker, houseboy, female garment worker, and war enemy) as homo economicus represents a new positioning
of Asian citizens in the context of the so-called “neo-Confucian challenge” from across the Pacific.

Increasingly, the model minority label represents the triumph of corporate discourses about Oriental productivity linked to the opening of the latest American frontier. With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of China as a capitalist economy of great promise, corporate America is again turning to the Asian-Pacific countries. U.S. immigration policy has come under the influence of various corporate and Asian lobbying groups, who have mounted a new strategy to recruit Asian labor, capital, and knowledge.

In 1990, the most far-reaching change in the U.S. immigration system since 1952 was enacted. A new “investor category” was created in the nationality law to compete with Canada and Australia for the world’s (assume Asia’s) flight capital. In contrast to formerly long waits for residence rights (due to quotas of two hundred thousand immigrants from each country every year), would-be immigrants can now obtain a green card in return for a $1 million investment that results in the creation of at least ten jobs. On Wall Street, seminars directed at Chinese Americans offer suggestions on how to get “U.S. citizenship through real estate investment and acquisition.” An entrepreneur urges, “Think of your relatives in Asia. If they invest $1 million in you, they get a green card and you get a new business.” Thus, like other countries with finance-based immigration (major examples are Australia and Canada), citizenship becomes an instrument of flexible accumulation, both for the would-be emigrant and for the host country.

In this “New World Order” social imaginary, Chinese/Asians are cast as extraterritorial citizens, capital-bearers and operators on the margins of Pacific Rim empires. Their positioning is now determined by corporate interests that view trade competition as war. This attitude was expressed by David Murdock, chairman and CEO of Dole Foods Company, at a conference on “Asian Americans” in Los Angeles. Murdock noted that in a world of multipolar economic powers, technological power had shifted to the Asian-Pacific region. Murdock personifies transnational corporate America; his company has operations in more than fifty countries and employs thousands of employees in the Asian-Pacific region. Noting that there are over seven million Asian Americans, he argues:
We need to be more competitive. We need more people who understand the languages, cultures, the markets, the politics of this spectacular region. Many Asian Americans have language ability, cultural understanding, direct family ties, and knowledge of economic conditions and government practices throughout Asia. This knowledge and ability can help Americans achieve political and business success in the region. . . . Much of their insight and ability can [help] in opening doors for the U.S. building a new structure for peace in the Pacific.22

Corporate America views Asia as the source of specific economic and cultural capital that, embodied in Asian Americans, can be converted into forces against Asian-Pacific economic ascendancy. By defining diaspora Chinese as circulating symbols of economic value and opportunity in the Pacific Rim, corporate discourse interweaves the “good” Orientalist image of Asian Americans into the wider discursive terrain of the Orientalist trade enemy (post–Cold War Japan).

**Narrating Cosmopolitan Citizenship in the West**

While Orientalism has been described by Said (1978) as a one-sided and self-reifying process,23 I have suggested that the discursive objects themselves participate as cocreators of Orientalist codes, as Asians move within changing configurations of national and transnational arenas of power. For centuries, Asians have been shaped by a perception and an experience of themselves as the Other of the Western world (Hall 1990, 225–226). However, in recent years, the new prominence of Asians in world markets has enabled Chinese subjects to participate more autonomously in the dissemination of their self-identity despite Orientalist hegemony in the West. Self-narratives valorizing aspects of Chinese culture have emerged to (re)frame diaspora Chinese as cosmopolitan moderns who possess both capital and humanistic values. They are hailed as “a modern kind of cosmopolitan literati” who have embraced Enlightenment ideals of rationality, individual freedom, and democracy (Wang 1991, 148, 152). Others claim that Confucian Chinese humanism will create a kind of capitalism without the destructive instrumental rationality and individualism of the West (Tai
1989; Tu 1989, 1991)—in other words, a kinder and gentler capitalism for the twenty-first century.

These self-narratives produce an image of reality that in the West seeks to efface the everyday realities of Chinese capitalism, and win social receptivity for the Asian nouveaux riches. For instance, Hong Kongers hail from a colonial territory where “democracy” is denied and where there has been little nurturing of Confucian humanism and democratic values. Many have developed a radically apolitical stance toward the state. Just as Hong Kong was viewed as a place for maximizing economic gain, so the Western democracies to which many are bound are considered primarily as “gold mountains” of opportunity. Society is seen as “an expanding sum economic gain” from which all will benefit, though unequally (Lau 1983, 119). Overseas Chinese labor practices, now exported to mainland China, count among the most exploitative in the world (Liu 1990; Ong 1991; Cheng and Ping 1992). Thus, democracy for many Chinese entrepreneurs often means the political freedom to accumulate wealth, while the state and wider society become of concern only when they can be made relevant to family interests (Lau 1983, 118). In the view of these entrepreneurs, the modern social order is built upon the domination of those who possess intellectual and economic capital, and wealthy people are considered the models of envy and emulation rather than enemies of the poor (119; Wong 1988). Indeed, the modern sensibility of Chinese capitalists who engage in overseas philanthropy is (besides escaping property taxes) to gain social status as prominent members of society; it is not a reflection of Confucian humanism. A new move is to give large endowments to American universities so that family names will be affixed to buildings of higher education in the West. As billionaire Li Ka-shing claimed, “there is no other criterion of excellence (except money)”; as a creature of the mercantile capitalism of Hong Kong, only more money can buy the social respectability he craves (Pan 1990, 366–367). These beliefs and practices that lie behind much of Asia’s economic growth are elided in self-Orientalizing discourses that construct Overseas Chinese as humanistic citizens of late capitalism (Tu 1989) who deserve a special role in the racial hierarchies of the West.

The intervention by Asians into their corporate image first took place in Los Angeles, where the internationalization of the American economy has
made local elites beholden to the Tokyo financial downtown (Davis 1991, 16). As American inner cities become dominated by foreign Asian capital, the synergic interplay between globalized markets and the transnationalized media has dissolved American culture as an autonomous sphere, creating an explosion of cultural codes (Jameson 1991, 41, 275–277). At the same conference where Murdock spoke, council member Michael Woo, who attempted to become the first Asian mayor of Los Angeles, asked: “What then is this new person, this American Asian?”—in the new era of the Pacific? The question, reminiscent of European queries of Anglos earlier in the century, subverts the view of Anglos as the undisputed key players on the West Coast. Woo, who has close ties with the Pacific Rim corporate community, proposed a “new hybrid role for Asian Americans” as ties with the Pacific Rim increase, and as their role in cities of this country becomes more significant. New Asian immigrants (rather than long-resident Asian Americans, he seemed to suggest) can act as “translators, go-betweens [between] one culture and another, using skills that have brought us to such prominence and success in the business world and in the professions, and entering into the public arena, the arena of community relations.”

Asians are “bridge-builders,” Woo maintained. His bridge-building concept seems to rest upon the symbiotic corporate and media codings of Asian American, but speaks to the wider world of mobile Chinese capitalism. The metaphor “bridge” (qiao, a pun with the qiao of huaqiao/Overseas Chinese) has become a narrativized image of corporate Chinese as they shift through multinational sites of operations. As narrated by Woo, the Asian “middleman minority” is not the besieged ethnic group of academic language (Bonacich 1973). Instead, it invokes the role of compradors and of the Hong Kong Chinese elite who act as middlemen between the colonial government and the masses to avert social conflict (Lau 1983, 15; Wong 1988, 131). The bridge-building image appeals to the shared social practices of an Asian elite largely composed of engineers, doctors, lawyers, managers, businessmen, and bankers, who see themselves as self-made men who are now building the infrastructure of a modern, affluent community. Woo notes that in their history of diaspora, Chinese/Asians have developed “survival traits” as traders making a living “in the midst of cultures very different
from their own.” “Those kinds of skills” that spell success in business and in higher education include skills in the exchange of money and in learning how to size up people, negotiate a deal, and engage in long-term planning. Asian immigrants can “transfer” these practices to non-Asians. The narrative thus skillfully appropriates the Anglo image of Asians as disciplined *homo economicus*, but, by claiming their importance in the multinationalized economy, renegotiates the contingent incorporation of new Asian immigrants in the changing civil society.

This kind of self-narrative is never simply complicit with hegemonic discourses, but seeks in this case to reposition Asian Americans as new authority figures, while implicitly criticizing the Anglos’ declining human capital and leadership qualities. By calling Asian Americans the new Westerners, Woo implies that the Anglos have been surpassed in diligence, discipline, capital, and even knowledge of the new global economic order. The narrative also creates a space for Asian Americans as mediators in American race and class relations. The bridge-building citizen invokes the tradition of American communities, the notion of a civil society where neighbors look out for each other.26 Woo’s bridge-building concept positions Asian leaders as having special access to the government, and as mediators for other racial minorities, for whom the middlemen minority are a model to emulate. By identifying Pacific Rim capital with Pacific Rim bodies, the image implicitly criticizes less-privileged minorities and their dependence on the welfare state of Western democracies.27 A gentrified Asian American identity is elaborated at the expense of other minorities. When the conference at which Woo spoke drew to a close, the Asian audience voted to call themselves the “bridge-building minority,” a concept that enables Asian Americans to share the postmodern image of Overseas Chinese as enlightened capitalists creating the Pacific century.

**Conclusion**

In recent years, the emigration of Chinese out of Asia has increased their agency in the production of transnational codes of Asian identity as they seek acceptance as citizens of Western democracies and as entrepreneurs in different zones of late capitalism. Overseas Chinese manipulate their image
as internal outsiders in the West by producing discourses of themselves as productive and law-abiding minority citizens. They actively deploy images of themselves as skillful handlers of money (Freedman 1959), trading minorities (Wertheim 1964), and middlemen (Bonacich 1973) in global corporate and media discourses, thus intervening in the epistemological field within which they must situate themselves in the West. By affirming and elaborating upon their postwar image as a self-disciplining *homo economicus*, they help create wider social acceptance of their racialized selves in Western countries, and flexibility in their maneuvers in the margins of nation-states.

These practices are “fundamentally ambiguous, mobile and ‘revisable’” (Mbembe 1992, 23), expressing a deterritorialized modern consciousness that plays along with Orientalized image realities, emphasizing different valences—Chinese “roots,” self-discipline, capital-producing talent, humanistic capitalism, or minority mediation—depending on the particular context. By using shreds and pieces of Orientalism, Overseas Chinese become autonomous postmodern producers of transnational narratives, thus disseminating a shifting social knowledge of themselves in the West. Their flexible strategies have been devised not to collaborate in the biopolitical agenda of any nation-state, but to convert political constraints in one field into economic opportunities in another, to turn displacement into advantageous positioning in a range of local contexts, and to evade national corporate interests in order to reproduce the bio-power of the family anywhere that capitalist opportunities are present.28

What do these strategies of postmodern capitalism and shifting symbolic positioning tell us about the varied meanings of citizenship in the late twentieth century? I have noted that in the nineteenth century, colonial rule severed the traditional loyalty of mercantile Chinese to the mother civilization and that postcolonial Asian governments failed to promote a strong sense of modern citizenship among Overseas Chinese. I coin the term “flexible citizenship” to describe their opportunistic search for citizenship abroad that will facilitate their strategies of flexible accumulation and their attempts to evade the political costs and debits of minority entrepreneurs in Western countries. There are thus different aspects to such flexibility in capital accumulation, meaning positioning and strategies in relation to citizenship.
Flexible capital accumulation, by nation-states and by entrepreneurs, has led to the commodification of citizenship. For Overseas Chinese, the purchase of citizenship outside China has greatly facilitated entrepreneurial activities on a global scale. Western countries seeking Pacific Rim money have changed their citizenship laws to attract Chinese capital-bearing citizens. *Homo economicus* has become the code term for wealthy Chinese immigrants assumed to be disciplined and productive citizens. Such official discourses about a preferred immigrant group/would-be citizenry create a transnational discursive terrain which Overseas Chinese can mine and rework to promote their cultural and social status in the West. It has been noted that in the United States, ethnic and racial metaphors are frequently used to gloss over class differences (Ortner 1991). Linked to Pacific Rim corporate power, a new generation of Chinese American leaders plays along with Orientalist images by finessing the *homo economicus* image into the bridge-building minority image, thus at once appealing to the state’s desire for productive, capital-bearing citizens while submerging their upper-class status in an ethnic minority label. Such self-narrating gentrification hopes at the same time to increase social acceptance while reducing racial and class hostility. The discursive manipulation of transnational Chinese identity is thus an irreducible part of the symbolic economy of flexible accumulation by both Asian entrepreneurs and Western countries seeking Pacific Rim capital.

This notion of flexible citizenship, linked to flexible accumulation and mobile investors, suggests that the citizenship concept should be examined in the context of the global economy and the range of meanings it can have for different groups of people. While people continue to fight and even die for their particular visions of citizenship (Anderson 1983), as in the “ethnic cleansing” campaign in Bosnia, for many wealthy Overseas Chinese, citizenship in the profound sense of duty toward or identification with a particular nation-state is minimal. A Chinese investor based in San Francisco explains that he can live in Asia, Canada, or Europe: “I can live anywhere in the world, but it must be near an airport.” Overseas Chinese diaspora metaphors— the tidal wave, astronauts, bridge-builders— reflect the capacity, even desire, of Overseas Chinese to live/work in many countries, and their feeling that the local context is less relevant to their political or cultural identity. Their subjectivity is at once deterritorialized in relation to a partic-
ular country, though highly localized in relation to the family. Such flexibility of options, whether financial, spatial, social, or legal, constantly destabilizes and even attenuates what it means to be Chinese. Their shifting narratives rework global displacements and liminality into a self-inscribed alterity to the Western insistence on a single national identity.

Notes

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The following publications cited in the text have been abbreviated as follows:

SFC  The San Francisco Chronicle (San Francisco)
SCMP  The South China Morning Post (Hong Kong)
WSJ  The Wall Street Journal (New York)

The newsmagazines Asiaweekly (San Francisco) and Newsweek (New York) are cited in the Notes but not in the References.

Italicized Chinese words are in pinyin or in romanized Cantonese (the latter preceded by “Cant”).

1 Marcus has noted that a modernist ethnography entails “the juxtaposition of two identity predicaments”—that of the subject and that of the ethnographer, who should be recognized as another Other (1992). For emigrants from the third world, our experiences of modernity have been particularly radical; we have experienced over a century of changes in one short lifetime. Identity is a production, always unfinished, “always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall 1990, 222; Bhabha 1990; Prakash 1992).

2 The most he could hope for was for them to return to Hong Kong with their shiny new Canadian and Australian passports (SCMP, 28 January 1988). That year, the U.S. doubled its acceptance of Hong Kongers to 10,000, while Canada admitted over 23,000, but Japan demurred (NYT, 6 March 1990, A9). At about the same time, British policy threatened to repatriate over 40,000 Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong, who were classified as “illegal economic migrants” (NYT, 25 February 1990). Impoverished Vietnamese do not even merit a BDTC, even when Hong Kong continues to import thousands of laborers from the Chinese mainland.

3 SCMP, 29 December 1987.

4 Newsweek, 16 April 1990, 41.

5 What may be considered “prodigals” by China are “yompies” or “young outwardly mobile professionals” to others (SCMP, 16 January 1988).
6 Under the guise of democratic reforms, the British government seeks to ensure British capitalist interests in Hong Kong’s development. This move pushes Chinese capitalists who are already deeply involved in China’s modernization to side with China against what they see as Britain’s attempt to secure its economic domination in Hong Kong (NYT, 9 January 1993, 15).

7 For more details on finance-based immigration programs, see SCMP, 20 November 1988.

8 Chinese modernity obviously also refers to the cultivation of the self. A deeper analysis would discuss how diaspora Chinese engage in highly individualized modes of self-fashioning, through the internalizing of different kinds of self-discipline, acquiring the habits and tastes which, though localized, can measure up to an international standard of what constitutes a modern lifestyle, especially in the area of consumption.

9 The post-1960s affluence of these Asian countries has led Western scholars to seek a “cultural” explanation by referring to the everyday family, work, and social relationships of emigrant Chinese in essentialized “Confucian” values. Academic and state developmentalist discourses identify as “Confucian” the communal values of hard work, deferred gratification, harmonious relations, respect for authority, and group identity (Berger and Hsiao 1988). Such Western constructions are gladly appropriated by some Asian intellectuals in their cooptive negotiations over the meanings of modern Chinese culture and identity (Tai 1989; Tu 1989).

10 Large Chinese enterprises have existed in China for centuries (Ho 1962; Elvin 1973). By the nineteenth century, the great South China diaspora exported Chinese family enterprises into Southeast Asia, where they operated under European powers presiding over colonial capitalist economies. I argue that Overseas Chinese capitalism developed under colonial circumstances (thought dominated by European capital), and the rise of an Overseas Chinese capitalist class in postcolonial affluent Asian countries marked the full integration of Chinese enterprises into the global economy.


12 Over the past two decades, there has emerged a distinctive Overseas Chinese capitalist formation, based on a proliferation of family businesses, interlinked by extensive and flexible networks, that facilitates business operations and capital mobility across different economic levels and national borders in the Asia-Pacific region (Lim and Gosling 1983; Chen 1984; Wong 1988; Hamilton and Chen 1991; Hamilton 1992).

13 Newsweek, 16 April 1990, 42.


15 Many emigrants have been charged with more than just neglecting their wives and children overseas. There are also reports of aged parents or handicapped children being “dumped” in Hong Kong or China when families emigrate (Newsweek, 16 April 1990, 44–45; NYT, 11
July 1990. While many living are left behind, some dead Chinese join their families overseas. In 1990, over a thousand dead were exhumed and their remains sent overseas so that families can continue to tend their graves. Apparently, immigration laws in advanced countries will bar the entry of retarded relatives, but not the flying dead. Home is no longer a place, but the family, dead or alive, you manage to bring with you.

In this regard, Omi and Winant (1986) fail to take into consideration how racial formations in the United States are directly linked to neoliberal assessments of human capital worth.

The irony is that Chinatown working populations came to be shaped by the Great Society programs and the African American fight for civil rights. Radical college-educated Chinese intellectuals who set up storefront programs to provide health care, housing needs, and other programs for poor immigrants participated in a black-inspired ethnic consciousness. They saw Chinese immigrants as the victims of racist capitalism, a view shaped by the Marxist framework of many ethnic studies programs in colleges that were instituted on a wave of ethnic radicalism.

Obviously, there is a range of Asian American images besides the model minority, like the inscrutable war/trade enemy. Chinese Americans like Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston have explored ethnic self-identity in the tensions between aesthetics and politics (Chan et al. 1991). However, such literary works as theirs, together with more recent performative criticisms of Orientalist images (see, e.g., Kondo 1990), have had less impact on the national consciousness than the media-generated images of Asians in Asia and in the West.

The U.S. Government hopes in all to attract $4 billion a year and create as many as 40,000 jobs annually (WSJ, 21 February 1992, B1). That goal has yet to be reached. Many Hong Kong Chinese consider the investment figure too steep, since for about U.S. $300,000 they can obtain a Canadian passport. Furthermore, since the law was passed, great investment opportunities in Southern China have sucked a lot of diaspora Chinese capital back to Asia (see Ong 1993).


I very much appreciate Don Nonini for pointing this out to me.

Woo elaborated: “Asian Americans have been instrumental in the U.S. march to greatness, helped build railroads, agriculture, state economy, distinction in education, professions, businesses.”

As a politician with a tiny Asian support base, Woo depends primarily on votes from multi-ethnic constituencies, especially whites and blacks. There is something about his bridge-building model that echoes the Confucian relationship between older and younger brother.
Thus Confucian-relation ethics—with its paternalism and elitism—is insinuated into city politics. This construction apparently found some acceptance among Los Angeles citizens, since despite the failure of interethnic coalitions during the 1992 class/racial rioting, Michael Woo remained for a time the most popular candidate in the mayoral race.

However, as Hall and Held (1990) note, citizenship rights are public entitlements, but does a citizen have the material and cultural resources to choose between different courses of action in public life?

See, for example, an account of a Chinese executive from the Asia Bank in New York snapping up apartment houses and real estate in the Ukraine even as local citizens were pulling down Lenin's statue and selling off their Bolshevik trinkets (NYT, 31 August 1991).

I do not intend to diminish the emotional and cultural ties many Overseas Chinese may feel toward a newly emergent China. There are many ways to “go home,” as many huaqiao have done by visiting mainland relatives, investing in hometowns, helping to modernize Chinese industries, or participating in the prodemocracy movement. However, it remains doubtful that many cosmopolitan Chinese would choose to become Chinese citizens, or settle there permanently.

References


