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## **Do Globalization and Migration Undermine Social Cohesion?**

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# DO GLOBALIZATION AND MIGRATION UNDERMINE SOCIAL COHESION? <sup>1</sup>

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Social cohesion, an old issue whose origin can be traced to the rise of Sociology when the disjuncture between simple rural community and complex urban society emerged, has re-invoked tremendous attention in academic and policy circles in the past decade. Among the forces that have given rise to the revival of this issue in the 1990s, the accelerated process of global migration is an essential one. It inevitably pluralizes the cultural and ethnic composition of population and increases differentiation of societies, all being tendencies that are often seen to challenge the basis of social integration. As we are increasingly confronted “with an extensive cultural and historical diversity that proves impermeable to the explanations we habitually employ” (Chambers, 1994: 2-3) we are compelled to seek “a reconception---both theoretical and political---of familiar notions” (Clifford, 1992: 108). This paper therefore aims to reexamine through a specific empirical situation the concept of social cohesion and the conventional approach to it in a global era from the perspective of migration and ethnicity<sup>2</sup>, especially in terms of the integration of migrant groups into an established ethnic landscape.

Hong Kong, given the diversity of subethnic groups in its population and its pivotal position in global Chinese networks, is an ideal place for investigating the problems stated above. In this paper, rather than exploring sub-ethnicity and migrants in Hong Kong in general, we will focus on one particular group, the Indonesian Chinese. We will trace how this group of migrants have integrated into local society and located themselves in an “ethnic niche” in Hong Kong by creating new organizational principles and a new identity. Our findings suggest that, in the first place, migration and social cohesion are not incompatible if we go beyond the rationalist definition of social cohesion. Social cohesion, as we understand it, is not simply a set of shared values, traditions and practices, but “a culture that both recognizes difference and is committed to resolving its antagonisms” (Rutherford, 1990: 26). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, our research unveils the mechanism and dynamics of social grouping in a migrant society in an era of globalization. With migrants being able to mobilize global resources in an innovative way to map and re-map ethnic landscapes, such positive and creative responses have effectively enhanced solidarity and provided a common framework for greater social cohesion.

This paper begins with a brief review of migration and social cohesion in general and the sub-ethnic landscape of Hong Kong in particular. It is followed by a profile of the Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong as background for discussion. The main parts are ethnographic accounts of the social re-establishment and identity formation of the Indonesian Chinese community. It concludes with a discussion of the theoretical implication of this case study on social cohesion.

## MIGRATION, SOCIAL COHESION AND THE ETHNIC KALEIDOSCOPE IN HONG KONG

The paradox of migration and social cohesion has been widely recognized (e. g. Vertovec 1999). Most current studies dwell on this issue through a rationalist approach, which implies that social cohesion connotes a set of positive things such as order, harmony and certainty. This approach can be further divided into two subsets according to different theoretical assumptions behind them. One is a proposition of the “romantic, homogenous sort” (Vertovec, 1999: xiii), in which social cohesion is grounded in classical sociological constructs like “Gemeinschaft” (Tonnies, 1955) or “mechanical solidarity” (Durkheim, 1964). It believes social cohesion is based on commonality of values, beliefs, identity, sense of place and dense networks, and is achieved and maintained by intimate entities such as family and parochial groups. With such an understanding of social cohesion, migrants are often considered highly threatening to social cohesion due to conceived cultural and ethnic unlikeness that they bring to the adopted communities.

The second proposition is a “heterogeneous form of social cohesion” (Vertovec, 1999: xxiv) based on sociological concepts of “Gesellschaft” (Tonnies, 1955) and “organic solidarity” (Durkheim, 1964). It believes social cohesion rests in shared principle and expectations despite differences and diversity in a society, and is achieved through interdependence of social actors and governed by formal authority. Within this complex model, migration is not necessarily a threat to social cohesion as long as migrants are committed to “cooperative activity surrounding common causes” (Vertovec, 1999: xxiv). However, this heterogeneous form of social cohesion continues to place a high premium on “basic patterns of cooperative social interaction and core sets of collective values” (Vertovec, 1999: xii) and suggests a unified, singular social canvas. Therefore, it is not fundamentally different from homogeneous social cohesion argument and is still caught in the rationalist trap.

This rationalist framework stated above cannot be applied to Hong Kong society, a large metropolis and a hub of international migration for Chinese. As Lee (2002: 185, tr. from Chinese) argues, Hong Kong is a place that “has plural forms of languages and cultures, an extremely high degree of population mobility (traveling, sojourning and migrating) and multiple identities formed accordingly, not to mention the rapid circulation of merchandise and a lifestyle overwhelmed by mass consumption and intense media activity. Because of all these, Hong Kong cannot be analyzed within the traditional nation-state analytical framework”. In terms of migration and ethnicity, the focus of this paper, we have discerned two structural features that contribute to the hybridity of Hong Kong’s ethnic landscape.

Firstly, although Hong Kong has long been known as a Chinese society and the major trend in studying Hong Kong identity seems to focus on the “Hong Kong People’s” identity (e.g. Siu, 1996), it is in fact more than a homogeneous Chinese society. It is in fact an amalgamation of various sub-ethnic Chinese groups. The population is constantly being replenished by new flows of immigrants. As the most common way to classify sub-ethnicity in the Chinese population is by native-place and dialect affiliation, the five main groups so identified are the Cantonese speakers, the Fujian (mainly the Minnan) dialect speakers, the Chaozhou dialect speakers, the Hakka dialect speakers and the

Shanghainese respectively (Sparks, 1976; Guldin, 1977 & 1997; Wong, 1988; Lin, 2002a, 2002b, 2002/2003). Most of them have set up their own regional associations (*tongxianghui*) and developed their individual identity since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though we may say that in the 1950s-60s and early 70s, there was a tendency in Hong Kong toward homogeneity built on the growing use of Cantonese by the different groups, and we witnessed the emergence of the so-called Hong Kong identity in the late 60s, native-place and dialect affiliations have continued to play a role in Hong Kong society in the 80s and 90s.

A number of factors contribute to this revival (Sinn, 1997). Recent elections in Hong Kong have further witnessed the use of native-place identity by candidates as a means of rallying political support. The opening of China has also made the native-place relevant to Hong Kong residents again, whether as target locality for investments or philanthropy or as a place for leisure or retirement. In addition, new immigrants from the mainland have either enrolled into the established association of their regional fellows (*tongxiang*) or establish new ones, and in turn further reinforced the locality-based ethnic groupings (Sinn, 1997, 1999, 2002). For example, there were at least 54 new regional associations set up in Hong Kong in the period from 1979 to 1990. Most of them were founded by new immigrants from mainland China especially by the Fujianese as a result of the proliferation of immigration from Fujian (Sinn, 1997: 395).

Moreover, despite the Hong Kong government's policy to de-emphasize sub-ethnic differentiations within the Chinese population and calls for new immigrants' adjustment to the new environment to promote social solidarity in Hong Kong, subethnic heterogeneity of Hong Kong's Chinese population has not declined. Rather, it has been augmented due to the accelerated process of globalization and immigration. Given what Arjun Appadurai calls "tension between homogeneity and cultural heterogeneity" (Appadurai, 1990:5), we see, on the one hand, increasing economic and cultural globalization, and on the other, social movements emerging that are based on the demand for autonomy and the right to be different (Wang and Chen, 1998:4). To seek autonomy and individual identities, more and more subethnic groups of Chinese migrants have transcended borders to establish global communities and construct "groundless" identities. For example, up to 1998, there were about 100 gatherings held by global Chinese associations based on common surname, kinship or clan, native place and shared cultural activities (Liu, 1998: 586). In Hong Kong, many subethnic groups have joined these global Chinese associations or maintained close connections with the Chinese migrant groups of the same subethnicity in other places of the world. In fact, associations in Hong Kong frequently chair international meetings of these globalized associations, or function as the communication centre. For example, the Chaozhou *tongxianghui* in Hong Kong held the 8th Teochew International Convention in 1995.<sup>3</sup> This new trend of seeking autonomy has led to the reordering of the sub-ethnic landscape of Hong Kong, making it more complex, diverse and nuanced, thus appearing to challenge what is commonly taken to be the basis of social cohesion.

For these reasons, we need to go beyond a rationalist perspective to achieve a more sensitive, people-centred and meaningful understanding of social cohesion in Hong Kong. This study will draw on an empirical and qualitative study of migrants and social cohesion, and focus on the process of community establishment and identity formation of one migrant group---the Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong.

## THE INDONESIAN CHINESE IN HONG KONG: A PROFILE

The term "Indonesian Chinese" is used in this study as a shorthand label to refer to those Chinese people who were born in Indonesia, migrated to Mainland China in the 1950-60s and re-migrated to Hong Kong in 1960s to 80s. It is only a shorthand label as we recognize the fact that there are Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong who had migrated directly to Hong Kong rather than via China.

Partially because of Chinese nationalism triggered by the establishment of the PRC in 1949, and partially because of a desire to continue their Chinese education, about 100,000 Overseas Chinese, dominated by students and teachers from Southeast Asia, migrated/returned to Mainland China in the early and middle 1950s. Another 200,000 Overseas Chinese migrated/returned in the early 1960s as a result of the expulsion policy against Chinese in a number of Southeast Asian countries (Godley, 1989; Godley & Coppel, 1990b; Mao & Lin, 1993: 206). Most of these migrants, after twenty years on the mainland, exited to Hong Kong and Macao when the Chinese Government, liberalizing its Overseas Chinese policy in 1972, granted exit permits to those who wished to leave China (Burns, 1987; Godley and Coppel, 1990a, 1990b; Godley 1989; Mao and Lin, 1993; Chin, 2003).<sup>4</sup>

By the time the Indonesian Chinese arrived in Hong Kong, most of them had been away from Indonesia for over twenty years. They had also undergone several rounds of identity transformation: Back in Indonesia in the 1940s, they were *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese), set apart from indigenous Indonesians, with a relatively clear notion of their ancestral native place and dialect affiliation inherited from their parents. Most of them had a clear national identity of being Chinese, reinforced by their education at Chinese schools in Indonesia, and also reinforced by the Indonesian nationalism that was fermenting all around them. Discrimination by the new nationalist government of Indonesia, which became independent in 1950, was another reason for the exodus.

Once in China, as *huaqiao* they were treated differently from the rest of the population. They were later officially classified as *guiqiao* -- "returned overseas Chinese" -- even though many of them had never been to China before, as we have noted, and were "returning" only in a symbolic sense. While in China, many of them never went to their ancestral native place either, so that the ancestral native place identity remained only purely nominal as well. For most of the Indonesia Chinese, the China experience was characterized by alienation. Not only did they suffer from the discriminatory and oppressive policy of the Chinese government because of their overseas ties and from suspicion as secret agents for foreign countries (Godley 1989; Zhuang, 2001: 244-304) especially during the anti-Rightist movement that began in 1957 and the Cultural Revolution that broke out in 1967. They were also traumatized by the severance of all previous relationships. The political situation, both in China and in Indonesia, forced them to break off communications with their parents and families in Indonesia. Being allocated to schools, universities and work units in different parts of China, they further lost contact with their schoolmates and friends from Indonesia. Many of them were further isolated when they were "sent down" for political re-education during the Cultural

Revolution. In any case, the political atmosphere in China at the time was hardly conducive to forging deep, trusting relationships. What they experienced was truly culture shock, "the anxiety that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse." (Ritivoi, 2002: 4)

The experience was all the more heartbreaking when we remember how full of youthful idealism many of them had been when they first chose to go to China. They had relocated to China because they were Chinese, different from the indigenous Indonesians around them, and yet, they were never treated as "Chinese" by people on the mainland. As James Chin Kong summarizes, "No matter how much effort they put into their daily lives and work in the hope of becoming real Chinese, most of them failed to change the image they left in local society as *huaqiao* or *Nanyang ke* (guests from Southeast Asia) though they had been learning and working in mainland China for a long period." And he very aptly concludes that "This local perception of their difference stranded the overseas Chinese in mainland China in an identity limbo." (Chin, 2003b: 76)

The problem of identity was exacerbated when the Indonesian Chinese arrived in Hong Kong, where they were lumped together by the local population with all those who had immigrated from the mainland as mainlanders, often despised and ridiculed as backward and ignorant. Only a small proportion of them could speak Cantonese – the majority was from Minnan, Putian, Longyan, Chaozhou and Hakka backgrounds – although by now, they all spoke Putonghua. Despite the fact that many of them were well educated, with doctors, engineers and university teachers among them, because their professional qualifications were not recognized in Hong Kong and they lacked useful social contacts, they were forced to take menial jobs and occupied only low social status. It was also difficult for them to identify with other mainland Chinese, who, as just noted, regarded those who had been born overseas as not *really* Chinese. Also, unlike other mainland migrants arriving in the 1970s who, if they wished to, were able to give expression to their identities by joining existing native place associations in Hong Kong, or even form their own new associations, and be able to capitalize on these networks in a variety of ways, Indonesia Chinese migrants from the mainland did not have that option, since they hardly knew their ancestral native place and had little affection for it or its people. On top of that, unlike other recent migrants from the Mainland who could visit their hometowns occasionally, they were unable to return to Indonesia during the 1970s and most of the 1980s.

Thus while they were struggling to adapt to yet another new environment, with all its political, social, legal and cultural peculiarities, they had yet more identity labels and markers piled on them. This new layer of migration experience contributed further to their dislocation. It took time for them individually to grope about for a meaningful self-identity, and to identify and locate those who might share the same yearnings. It took time also to formulate an identity that could be the basis for constructing a community, and even longer to formalize it.

## ORGANIZING IDENTITY IN HONG KONG

Most of the Indonesian Chinese arrived in the former British colony with almost nothing but their bare hands. After several years' of struggle, the migrants gradually settled down and began to consider long term plans, especially concerning career options.

There were three main choices depending on their personal qualifications. The first was to abandon their original area of training to start a small business of their own. However, only a small number of them took this path and managed to become entrepreneurs.<sup>5</sup> The second was to keep to their specialties and try to pass local qualifying examinations to enter the circle of professionals, as some doctors did. The third was to work as employees but try to enter at the white collar worker level or higher positions in the company. However, compared with other immigrants in Hong Kong, such as Shanghainese, Indonesian Chinese in the 1970s were probably at the lower end of the economic ladder. The majority of the group are "*da gong zai*" (a Cantonese term denoting low-ranking employees -- that is, excluding those employed as executives and professional staff), working in the manufacturing, construction and service industries, or are office clerks, brokers and managers at junior levels.

From the 1980s onwards, Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong began forming associations according to different principles. We have identified a total of 48 Southeast Asian Chinese associations in Hong Kong,<sup>6</sup> with Indonesian Chinese associations being the big majority.<sup>7</sup> Among these associations, 32 are made up of classmate associations. 13 are based on locality, while one is a research institute and two are composite associations<sup>8</sup>

Given that among all Southeast Asian Chinese associations, Indonesian Chinese classmate associations based on a Chinese-language high school overseas are dominant in terms of both number and vitality, and that the Palembang Chinese School's Alumni Association (HK) [PCSAA (HK)] is one of the earliest established and best-organized Indonesian Chinese classmate associations (Wang, 1999), this study will focus on the Palembang Chinese as the object of our enquiry.

## THE PALEMBANG CHINESE SCHOOLS ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

Although some of the Palembang Chinese immigrated to Hong Kong as early as in the 1960s, it was not until 1987 that the PCSAA was set up.<sup>9</sup> Among the many possible reasons for such delayed action, one is the severance of pre-existing social networks in the process of migration. Unlike the Chinese associations in Palembang itself, where the prevailing principles of organization were dialect, ancestral native place and blood bonds, according to which various *tongxiang* and kin associations were formed, for the Palembang Chinese in Hong Kong, the more conventional connections of consanguinity and ancestral native place had much less relevance. Instead, they resorted to new principles to organize themselves.

In 1987 after almost ten years of discussion and preparation, the Palembang Chinese Schools' Alumni Association was formally set up. According to its regulation, "All teachers and students of the Palembang Chinese schools and their family members, as well as "enthusiastic *qiaobao* (overseas Chinese) who support the schools" are eligible to become members [Journal of Palembang Chinese Schools Alumni Association (*JPCSAA*), 1987: 12]. The first board of directors was formed after "democratic negotiation". It was mainly composed of the representatives of each grade of the Palembang Chinese schools,

because such an arrangement was believed to “represent broader sections, and can be easily accepted and trusted by the Palembang Chinese” (*JPCSCC*, 1997: 3).

Structurally, the PCSAA consists of two levels: an executive council and the full session of the association members. The former is the administrative organ, comprising a chairman and two to three vice-chairmen. In addition, there are directors and vice-directors for each of the seven divisions, each division covering a specific aspect of the association's activities.<sup>10</sup> Charged with overseeing the operation of all seven divisions, the Chairman provides leadership in internal affairs; in addition, he represents the Association in external matters. According to the regulation, council members held office without payment. From the third session, the positions of Honorary Chairman, Honorary Consultant and Consultant, which are simply titular posts without duties, were added to the structure. The full session, the highest body of power of the PCSAA, is responsible for the election of council members, the review of financial and administrative reports as well as resolutions concerning all association affairs.

## CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN ASSOCIATION FORMATION

Significantly, the Palembang Chinese have decided to organize themselves and express their identity through an alumni association, which is, as far as social organizations go, still a relatively new form of association among Chinese. It is clearly a form imported into China from the West,<sup>11</sup> possibly through missionary schools. In the context of the history of Chinese association formation, both the change and continuity displayed by the PCSAA are worth noting. While categorically an imported form of association, the PCSAA has nevertheless borrowed elements from a pre-existing repertoire of ideology, language and practices of Chinese association organization, and displays cultural characteristics similar to those of older, more established forms of Chinese association such as lineage and native place associations.

What the PCSAA demonstrates is the wide variation of associations that Chinese organize, in terms of structure as well as mode of operation. This is, in turn, a reflection of their great adaptive capacity. Despite the similarities with lineage associations and *tongxianghui*, it would be wrong for us to consider the PCSAA as a corrupt form of either of these associations.<sup>12</sup> Rather, as Steven Sangren reminds us, we should recognize the great range of creative organizational responses to changing historical and environmental circumstances that Chinese people are capable of (Sangren, 1984: 411). With the more intense identity formation processes that are bound to result from more frequent migration and more complex migration patterns, it is only to be expected that innovative forms of Chinese associations, however rooted in older practices and ideals, will appear.

## TO CONSTRUCT A COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The primary basis for the Palembang Chinese community is common origin and the memory of this origin. The expression, creation and circulation of collective memory therefore were equally essential in the community building exercise. As the belief in common origin is a key component of ethnicity, highlighting that origin through public

remembrance/memorialization is an effective device for enhancing group identification/self-identification. Memory, as we know, may be unreflective and latent, or it may be consciously recalled and mobilized to serve the present. Members of a group may be the bearers of memory, but they can also be prompted to *perform* the act of recall (Bal et al., 1999). Collective memory, the work of collective agency, can be created through a variety of devices. In the case of the Palembang Chinese, the devices include the generation and circulation of various forms of writing and photographs, the use of symbols and the organization of rituals.

## Writings

The Association's Journal is one of the most powerful vehicles for expressing, creating and circulating collective memory. From its establishment in 1987 to the end of 2001, the PCSAA has published altogether 12 issues of the Journal,<sup>13</sup> which are distributed to a wide range of localities including Indonesia, Singapore, Australia, the United States, France and many big cities in China (*JPCSAA*, 1989: 6) besides Hong Kong. They are written either by association members or Palembang Chinese outside of Hong Kong. Except for a small number of works that are written in Bahasa Indonesian and English, all are in Chinese.

The Journal carries two different types of materials. One type consists of the dry facts of association business -- executive committee reports, financial reports, election results and so forth. The other consists of materials that convey what we might call the "memories and desires" of the community.<sup>14</sup> Three main groups of materials may be found in this latter category.

The first group, consisting of creative writings that dwell on the reminiscences of their childhood and youth in Palembang, forms the majority of the Journal's articles. They recall passionately the halcyon days at school: their academic accomplishments, the colourful extracurricular activities, the innocent friendships among peers as well as the deep affection between teachers and students. There are also warm descriptions of the folklore, food and natural beauty of Palembang City. It is impossible to allude to full texts here given the constraint of space; however, here are titles of some of these articles for illustration:

“The Moon in Palembang” (1989)

“A story of durian” (1991)

“Musi love warms my heart” (1995)

“Commemorate teachers and schoolmates” (1998)

"Commemorate mother school, cherish friendship" (2001)

No matter what form these works take -- essays, poems or letters -- they contribute in many ways to the construction of a history of the Palembang Chinese. Through the sentimental descriptions and fond recollections of the people and events in the past in

Palembang, they stimulate and generate collective memory among the members of this community, deliberately highlighting the strength of friendship and the profound bond with Palembang -- and ignoring the unpleasant happenings. The memory, in other words, is highly selective. This is best reflected in the following poem which celebrates the brotherhood of the Palembang Chinese based on their common past:

Though Palembang and Hong Kong are several thousand miles apart  
The schoolmate bond is as close as that of brothers  
We are of the same root: we all drank from the River Musi  
We are of the same heart: impossible to forget the passion of the past

["Unforgettable the passions of the past" (*JPCSAA*, 1988: 25)]

The Musi River, which is referred to with remarkable frequency in the writings, becomes the symbol of a cherished common origin, or, as one contributor claims, "the root of the alumni of the Palembang Chinese School" (*JPCSAA*, 1989: 12). Members talk of themselves as "Musi people" or "people who have drunken from the Musi River" as often as being past students of the schools. A number of poems pining for Palembang have Musi in their title, such as "Where is the source of the Musi River?" "Musi Love is unchanged" (*JPCSAA*, 1987: 6). "Though the Musi is small, it can turn great wheels. Though the Musi is short, its friendship is everlasting", lines presented by Principal Lai at one of the gatherings, is used as the title of an article (*JPCSAA*, 1991:12). An editorial even points out that the Association's "only aim" is "developing the fine tradition (*youliang chuantong*) of we the Musi River people, namely, unity, mutual assistance and spirit of friendship, and setting up our own alumni association" (*JPCSAA*, 1989:9).

While the Musi River marks the place, the cherished time is marked by their childhood and school days. What seems to matter more than an accurate retelling of historical events is the construction of a kind of mythic time in the past. Or, as Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (2002: 6-7) describes it, "the time of primeval beginnings and paradigmatic first acts, the dream-time when the world was new, suffering unknown, and men consorted with the gods .. the true time of the origins and archetypes". The concern for origin, which defines ethnicity, and not just in primitive societies, has led this group of individuals, each with many layers of migration experience and years of misery and longing, to their pristine childhood/ youth in Palembang -- or at least a childhood/ youth made pristine in their collective minds.

The second group of materials consists of historical documents from the Palembang Chinese schools, which are reprinted in the Journal, especially in the special issues lavishly published to mark the fifth anniversary of the PCSAA (HK) in 1992 and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Palembang Chinese School in 2001. They include the faculty and student roll of the schools of each grade, the membership of the students' union of each year, articles written by former principals and the history of the schools. These documents evoke latent memories of the school days buried deep in the hearts of the Palembang Chinese, and reinforce their identifications with their community. One of the readers recalls her reaction to the Journal:

The Journal stirs nostalgic feelings and sentimental memories of the past...Seeing the student roll, in particular, which consists of a list of over one thousand names, I am lost in deep thought and reminiscence. In this list, I find the names of my classmates, my academic brothers and sisters, and many friends I was less familiar with or even never met before... With each name, I see a lively young face. These faces then change into the faces of old men and old ladies. It is as if they are beckoning me, one by one, then chatting with me about ordinary, everyday matters, like members of a family.... Half a century has passed, yet our school days seem just like yesterday ...I would like to express my appreciation to the editors for their work, and to the schoolmate who has preserved this valuable document and is now sharing it with us. As our Chinese school in Indonesia does not exist any longer, this list provides us with a clue to seek old schoolmates and to commemorate our school. I cherish it very much (*JPCSAA*, 1993: 20).

The third group of materials consists of reports on the current situation of other Palembang Chinese. These articles relate the recent situations of former teachers in Palembang and news of former schoolmates scattered all over the world, and give accounts of the reunions of Palembang Chinese with their families and friends during their re-visits to Indonesia. Some of the correspondence among the Palembang Chinese is also periodically published. These writings have helped Palembang Chinese to re-establish contacts with their former teachers, childhood friends and even separated siblings, and reconnect the past with the present. The Musi friendship is thus not merely an object of commemoration, but a vehicle for the reconstitution of the community for the present.

## **Photographs and symbols**

Photographs are also an important component of the Journal. About 840 pictures of the Palembang Chinese have been published so far, greatly exceeding the number of articles. Apart from a small number that are printed along with articles, most of the photographs are printed in a separate photographic section. These photographs can also be divided into two categories. One category comprises pictures of gatherings, excursions, performances and other activities held by the Hong Kong association. The others are from their school days in Palembang, including photographs of the school campuses, group photos of the graduating grade or class, photos taken when seeing teachers and students off to China, and photos of various extracurricular activities. While the former group appears in the regular issues as a kind of record and report of current community activities, the latter are mainly published in the special issues to celebrate the shared history of the Palembang Chinese and trace the origin of their friendship -- indeed the origin of the group.

In addition to writings and photographs, graphic symbols are another block for community building. Firstly, pictures or drawings of the representative architectures in Palembang, such as the main building of the Palembang Chinese High School and the bridge over the Musi River, have been repeatedly put on the journal covers. In addition,

such Indonesian style architecture is graphically overlaid with some representative buildings in Hong Kong, such as the Bank of China Tower and the Convention Centre, to remind them of their shared migration experience, common origin and history.

Secondly, symbols of the Chinese Schools, such as the school motto, school badge, school song and the school's logo also regularly appear in the Journal, especially in the special issues. The inclusion of these images of architecture, emblem or melody that symbolize the common history of the Palembang Chinese is clearly designed to foster group spirit and solidarity through evoking memory.

It is interesting to analyze the nature of the memory. In romanticizing their childhood/youth, the group appears to be not only seeking solace in a happier time, and reinforcing the idea of origin as a basis for identity construction. It was perhaps also a way to negate the hard times experienced during the mainland years and the early days in Hong Kong. Other studies have demonstrated the difficulty of incorporating trauma into narrative memory (Bal et al., 1999: viii). If that period on the Mainland and in Hong Kong are indeed viewed by this cohort as the wasted years, to focus their memory on Palembang and see it through rose-tinted lenses, provides them a means of collective forgetting.

## Rituals

Just as lineages hold ancestor worship rituals, which play a vital role in enhancing solidarity, the Palembang Chinese conduct rituals for a similar reason. Their rituals include parties organized to celebrate the anniversaries of the founding of PCSAA and funerals for their leaders or former teachers.

Every year since the establishment of the association, they have held parties on the anniversary of the PCSAA, with the fifth and tenth anniversary celebrations being the grandest. At each party, all the leaders, consultants and community members turned up. Sumptuous feasts were prepared, and colourful performances were put on. These community-wide gatherings were poignant occasions to remind the Palembang Chinese of the spirit of comradeship and cohesion in this community, and thus strengthened their shared identity.

In past years, several Palembang Chinese have passed away, including community leaders and former teachers. The association published memorial articles in the Journal for each of them, and hosted funerals for the most respected ones. Since funerals are traditionally family affairs, it is significant that the PCSAA plays such an active role in funeral organization as a way to stress the tightly-knit and pseudo-familial nature of the group. The first large-scale funeral was held in 1990 for one of the founders of the PCSAA, who was also a teacher in Palembang and vice-chairman of the association in Hong Kong. Over 300 community members, together with his relatives and colleagues, attended that funeral. The chairman of PCSAA, the school principal and his classmates gave speeches to extol his virtues as a teacher, a schoolmate and a friend, as well as his unselfish contribution to the establishment of PCSAA (*JPCSAA*, 1990: 34-35). As this was the first funeral for a member of the Palembang Chinese community after they exited to Hong Kong, it made a deep impression on the community members. The death of their peers evoked reflections on their fate as part of a floating diaspora, reminding them of

their status as isolated strangers in society, and prompting cohesion within the community.

The Association also publishes obituaries and memorial articles for their former teachers and friends who pass away in Palembang.

## THE EMERGING IDENTITY

Like other mainland immigrants in Hong Kong, the Palembang Chinese encountered cultural barriers, social and economic disadvantages and "mis-labelling" by "the others" during the early period of their arrival. Despite being labelled by local Hong Kong people as mainland immigrants, they felt quite separate and distinct as a group. Unlike most of the new immigrants from Mainland China who could identify with their regional fellows (*tongxiang*) in Hong Kong by joining existing regional associations (*tongxianghui*) or establishing new one (Sinn, 1997: 394-395; Sinn, 2002: 4-8), the Palembang Chinese rarely joined these regional associations. They do not identify with the other sub-ethnic groups in Hong Kong, be they Cantonese, Fujianese, Hakkas, Chaozhouese or Hainanese, although these identities had been important to their parents in Palembang. Rather, as we have seen, they established a community of their own in the form of an alumni association, which is a new, adaptive genre of association in Hong Kong society and in the history of Chinese migration in general.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the role as cultural and identity "brokers" (Kuah and Wong, 2001: 210-211) between the immigrants and their native places, played by more conventional regional associations and embodied in such a motto as "Plant roots in Hong Kong; tie the hearts to the home region" (*zhi gen xianggang, xin xi guxinag*) (Sinn, 1997: 397), is obviously missing in the association of Palembang Chinese.

According to the interviewees, the PCSAA is the only association that most of the Palembang Chinese have joined in Hong Kong. They have little involvement with the regional associations of their ancestral hometowns in China. This phenomenon of detachment from their ancestral hometowns can be seen from the limited incidence of interlocking directorships among the council members and consultants of the PCSAA with other associations. Of the 29 members of the standing committee in the seventh council, only seven persons are also affiliated with other associations in Hong Kong either as ordinary members or as leaders. Only two consultants hold positions in other associations.

Involvement outside of the PCSAA, when it exists at all, is predominately with other Southeast Asian Chinese bodies. For example, among the seven associations which the PCSAA has links with, five are purely Southeast Asian Chinese associations. Only one is a regional association, which is dominated by non-Southeast Asian Chinese, the Yunnan Regional Association. However, interestingly, even in the case of the member who has joined this association, her ancestral native place is Fujian and not Yunnan, the place she was allocated to in China when she left Indonesia. As she explained:

Although I am a Fujianese, I was not born there, and I have never been to Fujian. Though there are some distant relatives there, we do not know each other... Yunnan is

the only place where I have lived in China. I do not know any other places. I only joined two associations, one is the Palembang Chinese Schools' Alumni Association, and the other is the Yunnan *Tongxinag hui*. That is enough. Both of them are the places I have ever lived. On the contrary, if I had to join the Fujian association, I would feel strange.

The PCSAA has also participated in inter-community activities either as co-organizer or in a supporting capacity. Significantly, all the activities they engaged in during the past 10 years were with other Southeast Asian Chinese associations.

In contrast to the limited social involvement of the Palembang Chinese in Hong Kong, the range of their global networking is rather extensive. In the past decade, school associations of the Palembang Chinese have emerged one by one in Mainland China and also in Indonesia. Connections between these associations are becoming more and more frequent and intense through both institutional links, such as exchanging association journals and participating activities of brother associations, and non-institutional connections such as visits among alumni and relatives, as well as irregular small scale gatherings of grade circles. We see the gradual emergence of a transnational Palembang Chinese networks, in which, each school association of the Palembang Chinese, no matter where it is located, being a node and, ultimately with Hong Kong functioning as a central node of coordination and communication. This networking is best illustrated in the celebrating party of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Palembang Chinese High School. This gathering was chaired by the Palembang Chinese in Hong Kong (not by the Chinese currently resident in Palembang where this school was based), and almost all the Palembang Chinese associations sent representatives to attend. Even those who are living in Western countries and could not attend the gathering still sent personal congratulations in the form of letters or telegrams to the party. Obviously, this reunion transcended national boundaries and turned out to be a “family gathering” of the Palembang Chinese spread all over the world. They dearly cherished this grand union, attributing it to the “Musi bond” (*Musi qing*) based on the common place of birth and schoolmate friendship. This attachment is best reflected by the song co-composed specifically for this gathering by principal Lai and other schoolmates:

### **A Eulogy of Musi<sup>16</sup>**

The alumni association reminds us of our childhood,  
and Palembang City where we grew up.

What we miss most is our mother school,  
That continues to benefit us throughout our lives.

Such blessing we can never forget.

So many years have gone, and we are scattered

To every corners of the globe

We suffer warmth or coldness in the world.

With you as a bridge, we could finally get together,  
Alas, the *Musi qing* is as sustaining as heaven and earth!  
[*Journal of the PCSAA (HK)*, No. 12 (2002), trans. by the authors]

Identifying themselves as Palembang Chinese, they highlight their internal subethnic and common experience, childhood and youth, while disregarding more conventional differentiations of ancestral native place, dialect origin and perhaps most importantly, their present locality of residence, even national belonging. They partly reflect a phenomenon in the Chinese diaspora that Emmanuel Ma Mung calls "groundlessness", a phenomenon which develops when Chinese migrants no longer count on "the country", a human and territorial entity, and instead place their faith in the group, a social entity. "It is as though," Ma Mung explains, "the attachment to the soil were transferred to the soul, identity and being of the group ... (and) ... they are wary or suspicious of the world outside the community or social body". (Ma Mung, 1998: 40-41) Unlike other transmigrants who continue to seek a home as an identity base, the Palembang Chinese have stopped doing so, because home is nowhere but in their spirit. Much as Palembang is the object of their affection and longing, their devotion is more a nostalgia for a mythical past, for their lost youth, than for a "grounded place" to which they would ever wish or hope to return.

## CONCLUSION

Through exploring empirically the integration process of one particular migrant group, the Indonesian Chinese, in Hong Kong with the Palembang Chinese as focus, this study suggests that, social cohesion in Hong Kong is not based on any deductible common attributes, values or any positive elements like permanence or certainty, as suggested by rationalist argument. Rather, it is constructed on constantly-evolving diversity and mobility. In a global era where change and hybridity have become the norm, social cohesion as defined in the rationalist tradition must be seen as "constraining, crippling, discriminating, excluding, and setting boundaries between 'center and margin', [between] a 'local' and a 'stranger'" (Chan, 1996: 44). To achieve an open-minded understanding of social cohesion, it is necessary for us to adopt a new "cultural politics of difference" (West, 1990) which calls for "the politically negotiable and incomplete character of identity and social formation... [and which] recognizes both the interdependent and relational nature of identities, their elements of incommensurability and political right of autonomy" (Rutherford, 1990: 10, 19).

The integration of migrant group and social cohesion of a migrant society is accomplished through an innovative mechanism of social groupings as shown by the Palembang Chinese. Having a migrating history that is different from all other migrant groups in Hong Kong, the Indonesian Chinese organize themselves into alumni associations and formulate a separate identity, illustrating the process of producing a "symbolic ethnicity", symbolic because it is "concerned with the symbols of ethnic cultures rather than with the cultures themselves" (Alba, 1990: 306). The new sub-ethnicity that has resulted is not based on older conventions such as shared ancestral place of origin and dialect affiliation, but on two newly constructed bonds. One is a new

regional connection. For the Palembang Chinese, Palembang replaces their respective ancestral hometowns in China as the new common place of origin, and *putonghua* replaces their respective dialects as the new common language. Everyone coming originally from Palembang takes each other as regional fellows, regardless of places of origin in Mainland China or the dialects they originally spoke.

The other bond is schoolmate connections. Through the alumni association, the Palembang Chinese have transformed and structured classmate connections into an effective bonding mechanism which links them together as a meaningful community. In the absence of real kin, they have invented a common descent, tracing it to their schools and school principal. The formation of this “symbolic ethnicity” is completed by their formulating a new “extra-territorial identity” that is more global-oriented than Hong Kong-oriented, termed as “the Palembang Chinese”. By responding creatively to the adverse and alienating conditions they found when they first arrived in the territory in this way, they have successfully located themselves in an “ethnic niche” as “another layer of Chinese” (Wang, 1997: 147). This mechanism has effectively re-ordered the subethnic landscape of Hong Kong. In the process, tension between sub-ethnic groups and social conflicts resulting from dislocation and disorientation of migrants is reduced, thus contributing to the social stability of Hong Kong.

In this paper, we have not referred to the broader interrelationship among sub-ethnic groups in Hong Kong due to limited empirical data at this stage, though we hope to focus on this later in our research. However, this case study does show that mobility and pluralism have not threatened or weakened cohesion in Hong Kong. Migrants can mobilize resources in an innovative way to transform adverse conditions into opportunities and meet the desire for emotional comfort as well as for upward social mobility by formulating new identities. These new identities can in turn facilitate transnational grouping and the mobilization of global linkages as social capital. Migrants and ethnic diversity have served, and will continue to serve as catalysts for the economic and social development of Hong Kong as long as we adopt the attitude suggested by Trinh (1991: 199, cited in Chan, 1996: 44) when we deal with ethnic issues in a migrant city:

...to listen, to see like a stranger in one’s own land; to fare like a foreigner across one’s own language; or, to maintain an intense rapport with the means and materiality of media language is also to learn to let go of the (masterly) “hold” as one unbuilds and builds.

Finally, where policy is concerned, freedom of association guaranteed by law is a prerequisite for social cohesion in a tolerant society. The Indonesian Chinese, by being able to freely form associations and freely articulate an identity that is meaningful to them,<sup>17</sup> have achieved a sense of security and comfort – not to mention the instrumental aspects of association such as the mobilization of all kinds of capital and networking strategies. The Hong Kong situation shows that allowing people freedom of association is one way to accommodate the diversity of the population, and generate the creative energies and resourcefulness that often result from such diversity. It is also likely to avoid

the statist and rationalist approach to social cohesion with the possible pitfalls of discrimination, bigotry and, exclusionism.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors are grateful to the Hong Kong Culture and Society Programme for funding the research for this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Max Weber (1864-1920), one of the earliest sociologists to define ethnicity, maintains that ethnic groups are "those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and *migration*; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists." (Weber 1978, 389: cited by Guibernau and Rex, 1997: 3) Spoonley's defines ethnicity as "the *positive* feelings of belonging to a cultural group." (Guibernau, 1) Anthony Cohen believes "ethnicity has come to be regarded as a mode of action and of representation: it refers to a decision people make to depict themselves or others symbolically as the bearers of a certain cultural identity (Cohen 1994: 119, cited by Guibernau and Rex, 1997: 4). Here, we will use the term ethnicity to refer to the identity, culture and practices of a group of people who feel a sense of connection based on a notion of common heritage.

<sup>3</sup> See 第8屆國際潮團聯誼年會：大會場刊 (*The 8th Teochew International Convention: Convention Programme*). 香港：該會，1995.

<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to establish an accurate figure for the Indonesian Chinese population in Hong Kong, as no official statistics have been published in Hong Kong to date. It is most likely that such information has not been collected, given that the government, both pre-1997 and post-1997, is more concerned to emphasize the homogeneity rather than differences among Chinese. It is now well recognized that Indonesian Chinese constitute the vast majority of the Southeast Asian Chinese in Hong Kong, whose numbers vary from 100,000 to 200,000 according to different sources of estimation, followed by those from Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Burma and Vietnam, which are the next six biggest Southeast Asian groups in terms of population (See Godley and Coppel, 1990a: 94; Li, 1987: 25; Chin, 2003a: 293-294).

<sup>5</sup> The interviews referred to in this paper have been conducted by Wang Cangbai. One of his informants, a key member of one Southeast Asian Chinese association, told him that, according to his personal observation, only 5 to 10 percent of the Southeast Asian Chinese are entrepreneurs. This assertion is supported by many articles in the publications of Southeast Asian Chinese organizations.

<sup>6</sup> No accurate and ready figure is available. However, we have noticed that names of Southeast Asian Chinese associations are normally listed on their publications after an over-arching activity.

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In recent years, Southeast Asian Chinese in Hong Kong held three important collective activities, which were the celebration of China's resumption of Hong Kong's sovereignty in 1997, and the demonstration against NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the PRC in 1999. A long name list is published in their publications, especially in the *Bulletin of Hong Kong Overseas Chinese General Association*, and in the special issues published for celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the PRC by "Hong Kong Overseas Chinese General Association" and the "*Chiao Yao Association Ltd.*" respectively. The lists attached to these three publications are almost identical. We therefore assume that almost all of the Southeast Asian Chinese associations attended these three activities, and the names listed in the publications can be regarded as a tentatively concrete list of the Southeast Asian Chinese associations in Hong Kong. Publications of other Southeast Asian Chinese associations and interviews with members of some Southeast Asian Chinese associations are also referred to.

<sup>7</sup> Indonesian Chinese associations constitute 58.3 percent of all the associations in this territory. In comparison, two are for Burmese Chinese; two for Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese, one for Thailand Chinese while the others are of multiple country origins with Indonesian Chinese as a major component.

<sup>8</sup> The classmate associations can be further divided into two subsets based on the location and nature of the school. The first subset, consisting of 23 out of a total of 32 classmate associations, is based on the Chinese-language high schools in Southeast Asia; the second, consisting of 9 schools, is based on the preparatory schools or tertiary institutions in Mainland China. Among the former type of associations, it is often the case that members are not only schoolmates, but also share the same place of birth (though not necessarily the same place of ancestral origin or dialect). These associations are predominant in number and show the greatest vitality.

<sup>9</sup> The date of its formal registration was 1988. See *Journal of the Palembang Chinese Schools Alumni Association (HK)(JPCSAA)*, No. 5 (1992).

<sup>10</sup> The seven divisions are secretariat, finance, accounting, communication, welfare, amenities and general affairs.

<sup>11</sup> Some of the oldest alumni associations in the United States include the Harvard Alumni Association, established in 1840 and the Associated Harvard Clubs, established 1897. The University of King's College alumni Association was incorporated in 1846 by an act of the Nova Scotia legislature and is the oldest alumni association in Canada

<sup>12</sup> It should be remembered that even among *tongxiang* and lineage associations there is no fixed form, but change in response to different historical environments as well. See Sinn (1991) which discusses the changing content of the activities and objectives of *tongxiang* associations in Hong Kong.

<sup>13</sup> Among these journals, four are special memorial issues, including Special Issues of the Fifth and Tenth Anniversary of the PCSAA, Special Millennium Issue and Special Issue of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Palembang Chinese High School.

<sup>14</sup> In March 2003, Professor Wang Gungwu gave a keynote speech at the Second Conference of Institutes and Libraries for Chinese Overseas Studies, 13-15 March, 2003, the Chinese University of Hong Kong entitled "Mixing Memories and Desires", quoting T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land".

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His point was that much of the materials researchers have collected on Chinese overseas focus on statistics, political activities, government policies and so forth, neglecting those that convey their feelings and aspirations. These elements, so far largely neglected by scholars in the field, are exciting concepts that can be used to guide future research.

<sup>15</sup> Alumni associations were also found in other overseas Chinese communities (Yang, F. G. (2001). However, they are not the same as the ones established by the Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong. Firstly, for the new immigrants in the United States, alumni associations are not the sole organization for them, but co-exist with other forms of organizations including recreation clubs, regional associations and religious organizations. They merely cater to students, scholars and professionals rather than the whole immigrant population. Second, the role of alumni associations in terms of social integration for the Chinese immigrants in United States is limited, while the alumni associations of the Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong play a much more predominant role.

<sup>16</sup> *Journal of the PCSAA* (HK), No. 12 (2002), P. 27. Musi is the name of a river that goes through Palembang city.

<sup>17</sup> We would be naïve to claim that there is never any outside interference in the formation of Indonesian Chinese associations in Hong Kong. The New China News Agency in the 1980s and 90s were active in encouraging the formation of associations as part of their united front activities. But it is important to remember that the Indonesian Chinese have taken the initiative in organizing their own associations and have their own agenda, even though they try to stay on friendly terms with the NCNA.

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