

## A Place We Call “Home” –International Students in Virtual Context

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### Abstract

*This paper examines how Chinese international students from a public land-grant university used online community to construct their cultural and ethnic identities. The author delves into the question of how online community enables these students to gain successful cultural assimilation. Extending on Baym’s (2000) theoretical framework of online group communication and Mabry’s (1997) critical discussion on constructing virtual identity, this paper offers crucial implications for how online communication forums, such as Bulletin Board System (BBS), evolve into cultural institutions as a result of affiliated members’ increasing reliance on virtual social networking. The cyber communicative practice may deny participating members’ access to authentic human communication and reinforce their negative self-labeling as an unassimilable or unfavorable “other” in a new cultural environment.*

**Keywords:** International Students, CSSA, BBS, Identity, Online Community, Communication

Ever since the Chinese government passed an “open door” policy in 1979, a large number of Chinese students have sought advanced education in the United States, and the number has increased yearly (Man & Lum, 1991; Hwang & He, 1999). In the 1980s, most Chinese students came to big cities like New York and San Francisco. The places where they usually visited and socialized with other Chinese students were mainly Chinatowns (Man & Lum, 1991). However, since the advent of internet and the growing diversification of geographical locations for Chinese students to study and work, Chinatown has lost its popularity among Chinese students. Instead, they are finding new “virtual spaces” to connect with other Chinese international students in the United States (Arnold & Schneider, 2007).

Based on a nationwide survey conducted by Xie (2008), the majority of Chinese international students in America refer to this virtual space as “CSSA,” the acronym for Chinese Students and Scholars Association. CSSA exists at universities where a certain amount of Chinese students are enrolled and is the largest Chinese student-run online community in the United States (Xie, 2008). Using Baym’s (2000) theoretical foundations and practical implications of the process and effects of online group communication, and Mabry’s (1997) critical approach to the construction of virtual identity, I examined how Chinese international students from a public land-grant university used CSSA to construct their cultural and ethnic identities. My research sheds light on how CSSA facilitates Chinese international students’ assimilation into the cultural environment of American university life.

I take a macro-view of analysis to envision how the growth of CSSA could lead to the transformation of its members’ communicative actions in various social interactions and circumstances.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Online Community

Baym (2000) argued that people hold contrasting attitudes toward the idea of online communication. Her study demonstrates that people who have a favorable attitude toward online communication and constantly participate in online activities are highly likely to form a close relationship with others from the same virtual group. Those who dislike participation are shown to be less interested and motivated in establishing any meaningful connections with other online members.

Most criticisms leveled against online communication focus on the high rate of identity fraud and information theft (Wood & Smith, 2001). However, scholars point out that the improvement of internet security systems and people’s growing awareness of self-protection in online communication suggest that the advantages of online communication outweigh the disadvantages (Connery, 1997; Ebben, 1993). In particular, the expansion of online communication often leads to the formation of a virtual space where people can freely share and exchange thoughts without having to reveal their actual identities (Baym, 2000; Connery, 1997; Ebben, 1993). In this sense, personal identity and private information are protected and available within an open and freely interactive environment.



Online communication provides its participants with a sense of liberation (Connery, 1997) because people do not have to give their real identities, and names, ages, education and professions can all be fabricated. Online communication fulfills people's "fantasy" of living in a space where no social norms and ethical values would prohibit them from expressing their true feelings and emotions to group members (Ebben, 1993). Baym noticed that online communication not only facilitates the establishment of "virtual friendship," but it also produces its own norms and rules as a "community."

### **Development of Individual Identity**

An online community requires the active and constant participation of members to reinforce its unity, stability and further expansion (Baym, 2000; Connery, 1997; Ebben, 1993). At the same time, an online community constructs an individual identity. The most popular way of establishing identities through online communities is through message posting (Nguyen & Alexander, 1996). According to Mnookin (1996), those who rarely post messages experience uncertainty in how to post, and share concerns about having nothing new to talk about. The frequent posters, largely due to their high investment, attain the most unique, recognizable styles in constructing the "dominant discourse" of an online community.

Mabry (1997) observes that people are free to name themselves anything they like in an online community. Most often, selected names represent some facet of members' personalities or physical characteristics. Through self-naming, individuals develop confidence, independence, and become comfortable in communicating with others because of the safe anonymity and freedom of self-expression. Over the course of time, online members simultaneously create meaning and social structure. Regular communicative practice establishes interactive patterns that evolve into systematic and normative controls that guide members' actions.

Individual members usually identify themselves within the online community as if they are really "from there" (Stratton, 1997). The name they give themselves for online communication becomes what they call a new "identity" (Stratton, 1997). When they meet other friends or members in offline activities, they are more likely to call each other the names they learned online (Stratton, 1997). The "identity" that a person establishes online is usually in contrast to who they are in reality. For example, a lot of shy, introverted people become very active, enthusiastic, and talkative in online community because they have found a way to unleash their feeling and emotions without the fear and psychological

pressure that is often encountered in real life communication scenarios (Tepper, 1997). The way members present themselves online offers them a completely new and "desired" identity that they do not necessarily have to claim in physical communities.

Recent research has focused on how ethnic identity is constructed through online community. Parks (1996) examined the communication within minority groups on the internet. Parks findings revealed that members of minorities use the internet to seek orientation, social acceptance and contact with other like-minded individuals or groups. Parks, (1996, p. 84) wrote, "Minority members are seen as social outsiders or other members of their group are just too far away, the direct social relations are often not easily accessible". The internet provides minorities with the means and spaces to meet and exchange with similar "others" (Parks, 1996).

The Chinese population constitutes the fastest growing immigrant group in the world (Stephen, 1992). Ever since 1981, Chinese immigrants have been the major part of the Asian immigrant population in the United States (Krauss & Chiu, 1998). They see themselves as Chinese and are treated as Chinese by their host culture (Krauss & Chiu, 1998). In recent years, a number of well-educated and highly-financed Chinese have become immigrants. Chinese students and immigrants are viewed as a "model minority" by American mainstream society (Greenberg, 2000).

Existing literature has focused on how specific on-campus organizations facilitated international sojourners' transition into new cultural environments but ignored the complexity of duality that is created between individual members and their associated online organizations. For example, Lin (2006) found that Chinese international students received support from local Chinese communities upon their early arrival on campus. Her investigation not only successfully confirmed existing literature on models of intercultural adjustment, but it also effectively challenged them by outlining a more dialectic and multi-layered agenda for future examination. Focusing on the communicative experiences of students in virtual space, Wood and Smith's (2001) study of forming online identity highlighted the "liberating effects" of anonymity and pseudonymity in students' desire of openly expressing their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. In particular, their study found that students demonstrated an active involvement and complex understanding of "various social issues related to gender and race when communicating in online chat-rooms" (Wood & Smith, 2001, p. 61).

In a physical classroom, students are not often motivated to voice their true concerns and perspectives where social roles and identities are strictly contained within hierarchies constructed by institutions of education (Wood & Smith, 2001), but the virtual space can enable active discussions and productive dialogic exchanges among students. However, Wood and Smith's study did not investigate whether there were differences across culturally-specific identities and students' social experiences through online activities, and how students constructed their identities through online communication.

The research questions for this study are:

RQ1: How do Chinese international students use CSSA to construct their cultural and ethnic identity?

RQ2: In what ways does CSSA enable Chinese international students' desires and attempts at entering the cultural space of an American university?

## Research Method

### *Discourse Analysis*

Discourse analysis explores how varying forms of social reality are constructed, negotiated, and reified through the use of language (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Discourse is defined as an "interrelated set of texts and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception that bring an object into being" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 5). The construction of discourse emerges from the reading of text, which can take a variety of forms, including written texts, spoken words, varying forms of pictorial representations, and cultural symbols (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thus, texts embody the material platform out of which discourse grows. However, the understanding of texts should not be limited to a fixed space where discourse can be solely made visible and comprehensible. In many ways, texts determine the lexical and syntactical rules of language. The evolving nature of discourse transforms the structure of texts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Premised upon this discourse analysis framework, this study explores on how Chinese international students' "ways of talking" (discourse) on CSSA (texts) sheds light on our understanding of their cultural identity, position, and experiences in an American university (social context).

### **Selection of Text: CSSA as an Online Community**

Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) is a multifunctional webpage, which provides Chinese international students with Bulletin Board

System (BBS), Special Event Notifications, the Study Hall regarding Chinese culture and festivals, and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). The study hall teaches international students from other countries and American students about the traditional Chinese culture, folklores and history. FAQ answers commonly asked questions such as tuition policy, registration, selection of classes and finding a Chinese roommate. BBS offers a platform to exchange ideas, share knowledge and experience about studying abroad, how to deal with cultural shock and language barriers, as well as what kind of difficulties Chinese students might encounter in adapting to American universities and cultural environments. BBS is a popular platform for Chinese international students to visit and leave messages because this section includes the actual lived experiences of international students.

Further, BBS is more flexible and interactive than the other two sections because it is not fixed on certain topics or posting routines. BBS provides a space for Chinese international students to freely post various messages that concern their lives, studies and teaching activities. In order to communicate through BBS, sign up is required, which allows members view and interact with other Chinese students associated with CSSA.

### **Analytical Procedures**

This study examines how online discourses shape and construct individuals' identities through discourse analysis. The text used for analysis was a United States CSSA associated with a Northwestern public land-grant university. For anonymity purposes, I refer to the name of this university as X, and the city where it is located as Y for this paper. I chose the BBS webpage as a major site for examination since it is the most popular section for Chinese international students to visit and leave messages in CSSA.

The BBS information at the X University is in Chinese language, excluding the study hall section because that one is initially designed for students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Selected postings from the BBS were translated from Chinese and studied for this research. In total, 112 messages were suitable for investigating Chinese international students' online discourse. I used a thorough process of reading and re-reading the selected messages and the thematic issues to insure a rigorous interpretation of the data. This enabled me to set a focused research agenda and to avoid information that was redundant or distracting to a critical scrutiny of Chinese students' online discourse.



## Results

Four major thematic issues were identified that represented Chinese students' construction of their salient cultural and ethnic identities through CSSA'S BBS. These four themes were English Illiterate, Small Town Syndrome, Constructing an Online Chinatown, and we are Sisters and Brothers. English Illiterate constructed Chinese international students as both culturally and academically unassimilable "others." Small Town Syndrome showed how Chinese international students' preexisting image of the United States was challenged by their actual living environment and experiences. Constructing an Online Chinatown demonstrated how students used BBS to exchange ideas about making authentic Chinese food. We are Sisters and Brothers showed how CSSA functioned to unify all Chinese international students to support each other and to offer financial aid to the Chinese government during a time of crisis. CSSA's BBS also motivates Chinese international students to interact with American students and faculty members, enabling Chinese international students to transition into the socio-academic culture of the American university.

### English Illiterate

Many CSSA online posters/users expressed frustrations regarding how language barriers negatively affected their life and study at the X University. English was the language of barrier for communicating with American students, and assimilating into American university culture. Many online posters shared a common joke about Chinese students' English; they likened their spoken English to writing a narrow research article because it contained unnecessary grammatical constraints. They described their written English as a casual conversation filled with informal grammatical errors and the inability to categorize clusters of different ideas into separate paragraphs.

One Chinese user/poster wrote on BBS, "English is not something we have in our blood, the way we understand them shall never reach the level of native speakers." Not only did English provide a challenge for their academic studies, it usually became the major problem that Chinese students encountered in communicating with domestic students. The English that Chinese students learned in China was not what average American people speak for daily communication. CSSA online participants described their learned version of English as highly structured and rigid that it was difficult to freely, clearly and succinctly express themselves in many social occasions. As a result, it often led to very awkward situations for both Chinese students and

American students. Both sides were embarrassed because of the misunderstandings caused by Chinese students' English inefficiency. For example, one CSSA poster commented:

"There were several times we went out to a social event: Chinese students only talked to Chinese students, and American students only talked to American students. Sometimes, we mingled, but this only happened at the beginning part of the social event. It was hard to keep conversation going with an American student in an English environment. You had to try very hard and speak really loudly to explain a simple concept. If there are were other American students around, they would just intervene and steal the conversation away from you."

Some CSSA online members were disappointed about their social life outside university because they felt they were considered a foreign international student. One of them lamented "I am a Doctoral student. This is my last year of the PhD. I have lived in U.S. for 7 years, but I still only socialize with Chinese students. My English has not improved significantly." Another poster jumped in and said, "I feel so lonely and marginalized. Sometime I feel I am just an intellectual slave, because we do not talk a lot, even when we speak, no one really cares to hear us because of our broken English and thick Asian accent."

### Small Town Syndrome

For many CSSA BBS posters at the X University, Y is a small, rural, "in the middle of nowhere" town. With a population of 27,150 estimated, some online posters felt they were isolated from the rest of the world. Some of them described it as a "utopian land" because everyone was so polite, nice and well-educated. Another group of online discussion participants referred to this small town as a "kindergarten" because of young college students.

Most of the comments concentrated on the fact that Y was a small and dull city. Young white college students were mostly from small towns where there were no foreigners with whom they might have learned to communicate. This fact made a lot of Chinese international students feel scared, lonely, and frustrated. Several BBS participants shared the same story wherever they went- a bar, gym, party, or even a coffee shop. One participant posted: "one night I walked on the street, a bunch of big white college guys walking towards me. It was around midnight; I just finished my school project and was going home from office."



It really frightened me.”

On the other hand, Y town also challenges to the prior image of the United States before coming to the university: grand, luxurious, metropolitan, culturally and ethnically diverse. Many online posters expressed disappointment with Y town and X University. One CSSA member posted:

“When I first arrived in Y, I was trying to find the downtown area. When I was sitting in a bar and nicely asking the waitress; ‘could you tell me where downtown is? Is there a bus or subway that I need to take to get there?’ She laughed and told me that ‘you are in downtown.’ I said ‘what? Are you kidding me!’”

Another poster wrote: “when I first landed in Y, I gave my Mom a call and seriously told her that I wanted to go back to Shanghai.” Sharing the same “sentiment” with the aforementioned messages, a CSSA member replied immediately:

“First time I came to New York. Then every year, I go to New York City no matter how much it costs me going there. Y does not make me feel I am part of it, but New York does; it is so diverse, wherever you go, you are part of it! No one will ask where you are from and it seems your English accent does not bother them at all.”

### ***Constructing an Online Chinatown***

For Chinese international students, Y town does not have a Chinatown or a Chinese grocery store. But there are three Chinese restaurants. Based on online remarks, these three Chinese restaurants serve great Chinese food. One online poster commented: “the food there is wonderful! It is definitely beyond my initial expectation. Everyone is polite and full of energy.” The following poster wrote: “I really cannot tell the differences among these three awesome Chinese restaurants; they seem all clean, cooking is well-prepared, service is superb. They give you more than you can actually eat! I could always have some leftovers for next day.”

The online forum also mentioned negative sides of the food and restaurants. One online poster wrote: “It is expensive, especially for international students like us. The money we earned cannot afford us to eat there a lot.” The following poster commented: “it really costs us a lot of money. But we have nowhere to go, those are the only places we can have some hometown taste.” Another group of posters showed their dissatisfaction

towards these Chinese restaurants with a different perspective: “they are delicious, but they are not authentic. I feel it is somehow tailored to please local American residents.” A similar post expressed similar concern: “dude, I totally agree with you! It tastes funny...because I think it is mixed with American ingredients. It is good, but apparently lack of that original Chinese flavor, something you can hardly find here.”

Many online posters held the same complaints. They all agreed that something had been changed during the course of cooking. The food was tasteful, delicious, clean and classy, but at the same time, fairly expensive and very Americanized. One of them wrote on the BBS board: “Damn! I really miss those Buns and Spicy Noodles served in New York’s Chinatown...they reminded me a lot about what we used to have for breakfast in China...2 or 3 dollars, you will get everything!”

Many CSSA members posted their own home-made menus for making Chinese meals, the locations and open hours of supermarkets that sell the condiments, seasonings and ingredients for making Chinese foods. One CSSA online member stated: “hey, guys, we should make it a regular routine; every time, we have some good cooking ideas, let’s just share it with others.” This post received overwhelming responses from other online posters; they all expressed a strong interest and enthusiasm to make “sharing cooking ideas and thought” into something regular on BBS.

### ***“We are Brothers and Sisters”***

CSSA created a strong sense of family for Chinese international students. Online posters usually referred to CSSA as “home,” “a safe wharf” and “a place where we can be who we really are,” and “a place where we are united as family members.” “Helping whoever needs help in this big family” became CSSA’s motto.

In BBS section, people posted various notices looking for help and assistance. Some of the posts were searching for Chinese roommates, a second-hand car or an airport pick-up. All these posts received feedbacks from other BBS members. Some posters provided very detailed responses to the inquiries. For example, one poster asked, “Is there anyone going to Spokane at the end of this semester? Both of my parents are visiting Y next month. I do not have a car to pick them up at Seattle International Airport.” This post was followed by numerous responses; some of whom wrote: “sorry, I do not have a car either; I wish I could help you, you may want to ask other Chinese students, especially



those who have lived here for many years. They usually own a car.”

BBS provided individuals with sources to get help, suggestions and tips from other Chinese saying: “we are under the same roof, when there is a difficulty, we go through it together, when life turns better, we share the joy together as well!”, they have developed a concept of family members through these postings. There were a lot of public notifications concerning various Chinese festival celebrations, job opportunities and special occasion parties. Many Chinese students posted their reactions, opinions and comments in response to these notifications.

When China experienced an unprecedented earthquake in Sichuan province in 2008, CSSA organized various donation activities through BBS. All posters lent strong support to China’s efforts to fight the traumatic effects left by the earthquake. For example, one CSSA member posted:

“I just donated 300 dollars today, plus I also gave out some of my family’s used clothes. We should donate more if needed!” Another poster continued: “this is really a good opportunity for all of us to come together, expressing our love and care for our nation! I only donated 100 dollars. That is all I can afford as a student. You guys please keep spreading the word around the Chinese community and see if we can garner more.”

In this way, CSSA was reified as a site for cultural and national unification. It provided a space where Chinese international students could identify their cultural origins and reinforce that identification by communicating with other CSSA posters.

### **Intercultural Transition**

CSSA helped Chinese international students locate a space to voice their concerns, share life experiences, and provide or receive help from other fellow Chinese international students. Many online posts expressed their deep appreciation and gratitude to CSSA. They thanked CSSA BBS not only because it made them feel safe, less lonely and homesick, but also helped them assimilate into the cultural terrain of the American university. One CSSA member posted a story:

“When I first came to X University, I had a horrible time in school and life because I did not know anything at all. I did not have any family and friends in the U.S., my English is also terrible. One night, I went to a Chinese student’s party and people there told me to look

for help on CSSA because they said I could post anything there. Every time, I posted some thing, there are always many responses after a day or two! For example, I learned how to open a bank account here, how to quickly and thoroughly read an English article and where to buy a cheap plane ticket! I made a lot of Chinese friends here. I am also getting along very well with my American classmates. We just went out last Saturday to a local bar. We all got hammered, but I liked it!”

In particular, many CSSA members were thrilled to be invited to an American social event and even more excited to find they could eventually study like an American student. One CSSA member commented:

“I went to my American professor’s house for the Thanksgiving holiday. His family was very welcoming of us. It was also my first time eating Turkey. To be honest, I wasn’t sure if I should accept the invitation at that time because I had never been with an American family before. I posted a note on CSSA BBS. A lot of friends online here encouraged me to go for it, because it is fun! After that I started going out with my American friends. It was truly an eye-opening experience; my English got better. You guys should do the same!”

BBS helped Chinese international students construct and reconfirm their cultural identities by offering them a platform for free interaction and information exchange. Meanwhile, BBS enabled them to assimilate into the cultural space of American university life both as a student and as a person.

### **Discussion**

CSSA provides Chinese international students with a virtual space and location to communicate and interact with each other. This online organization allows Chinese students to “communicate” and “negotiate” their frustration, problems, and personal experiences with others who needed help, suggestions and friends. CSSA provides Chinese international students with the authority to write about what they felt comfortable, interesting, necessary and hilarious in Chinese. Throughout the process of online communication, Chinese students through online forum have developed a capacity to detect and critically analyze various social issues and phenomena pertaining to their cultural experiences in the United States.

English illiterate, Small Town Syndrome, Constructing an Online Chinatown, and We are Sister and Brothers were four major themes that represented how

Chinese international students used CSSA to construct their cultural and ethnic identities at the X University and Y town. The identity construction showed how language barriers, perceived ethnic differences, specific geographical characteristics, and For example, Chinese international students' infatuation with "big and diverse America" was challenged by what they actually experienced in a small, white-dominated, rural college town. Their awareness of language disadvantages greatly frustrated them and determined their self-labeling as "the cultural and racial other."

BBS constructed an online community as a cultural institution, where everyone shared similar life stories, spoke the same languages, and helped each other. At the same time however, it eliminated the participation of those who did not speak authentic Chinese language and marginalized those who did not like receiving online information or who did not believe in online group communication. Moreover, BBS promoted, affirmed and normalized Chinese students' pessimistic self-naming and oppressive self-labeling as unassimilable and unfavorable "others." The cultural institution, in this sense, developed and reinforced its own organizational control and domination by eliminating those who did not fit (McLaughlin, Osborne, & Smith, 1995), and functioned to construct and rationalize individuals' negative labeling of self-identity as the "other" (Corey, 1996).

Although BBS helped Chinese international students find ways to communicate with American students and further assimilate into the cultural space of American university life, it also pulled them away from other places where students might look for relevant suggestions and assistance. Many Chinese international students are afraid of revealing their actual identity and resort to online community although everything is anonymous. It is not always guaranteed that online information is true and credible, online communities could be viewed as distorting productive social interactions.

CSSA is a powerful organization that constitutes control and regulation through active participation of its affiliates. Communication, if embodied here as Chinese students' online interactive posting routines, functions to create a structured organization - a reality that transcends the perception of participating individuals. Chinese students' enthusiastic engagement with CSSA enables the construction of a disguised space of oppression in which they enact their cultural identities as "the other" as well as isolate those who are not associated with the community of Chinese culture and language. Future scholarly endeavors could extend this line of inquiry by developing more studies of how communication between members in an online community affect shared relationships, construct varied

identities, and enhance or transform the overarching structures of virtual community.

### Conclusion

This research examined how Chinese international students used CSSA's BBS to construct their cultural and ethnic identities, and how it helped Chinese international students assimilate into the cultural space of American university life. Four major themes – English Illiterate, Small Town Syndrome, Constructing an Online Chinatown, and We are Brothers and Sisters— described how CSSA functioned as an online platform to construct Chinese international students as culturally unassimilable and linguistically disabled "others."

CSSA helps Chinese international students successfully assimilate into the cultural environment of American university. It encourages Chinese students to be actively engaged in American social events, and to communicate with American students and professors. It offers constructive ideas and thoughts to online participants about how to read English efficiently and study like an American student.

CSSA reveals its structural control through Chinese international students' increasing participation, frequent posting practices and growing reliance upon it. This project advances our critical understanding of how Chinese international students' identity formation is discursively constructed, performed, and "regulated" both on and off virtual contexts. By offering implications about how the voices of non-Chinese students are possibly "muted" by CSSA, including both international students identifying with other national identities and domestic students, I call attention to the ways in which the emergence of online identities may have simultaneous instrumental and detrimental impact on students' offline communicative strategies and social practices.

A limitation of this paper is my selection of data. The X University does not represent all CSSA organizations housed in the American universities. Many universities are located in big, highly populated and diversified regions. Therefore, a future project could be to tap into how CSSA in other universities help Chinese International students assimilate into mainstream of American culture or construct their cultural and ethnic identity.

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