A 'reality of return': The case of the Sarawakian-Chinese visiting China

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The influence of travel to China upon the identity of the Sarawakian-Chinese.
- (Re)construction of the Sarawakian-Chinese ethnicity when visiting their homeland.
- Significant role of homeland in forging new and hybrid identities.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Using an interpretive ethnographic framework, this paper focuses on how travel to the homeland informs the identity of the Sarawakian-Chinese, a diaspora that contains a composite of subcultures. The data collection is based upon 35 semi-structured interviews and participant observation of a Sarawakian-Chinese tour group to China. Whilst emotional connections with China are universally significant in constructing the diaspora's ethnic identity, the strength of association is influenced by characteristics of education, religion and language, as identity becomes re-defined and plural. The findings suggest that the influence of tourism to the homeland may not necessarily be significant in enhancing emotional and cultural connections with China. Instead, ambivalent connections to homeland become established during tourism experiences. Visits to the homeland could play a significant role in forging new and hybrid identities of ethnic communities outside the homeland, thereby bringing a new vital dimension to identity formation and communication of the Sarawakian-Chinese in the future.

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1. Introduction

In the discourse of diaspora, it is typically advocated that members of a diaspora desire a return to their homeland in order to fulfil their longing for home, a place which according to Falzon (2004, p. 89) whilst being physically 'unstuck' from, they remain emotionally 'stuck' to. The homeland is thus held as a place of significance for identity (Basu, 2004; Brubaker, 2005; Soysal, 2000), a site of core cultural values uncontaminated by the 'pollution' of other cultures or other elements of change. This discourse of association between the homeland and the departed typically contains traits of collective memories, of visions and myths, and a subsequent expectation of return to the ancestral homeland (Falzon, 2003; Safran, 1991). This manifests itself in Safran's (1991)

'myth of return', a paradigm according to which displaced peoples never fully integrate with the identity of the dominant host/new culture, instead retaining their emotional ties and identification with the homeland, aspiring to an eventual return there.

For Cohen (1997) the myth of return places too much emphasis upon the relationship between the diaspora and their homeland, ignoring collective and hybridised identities that may be constructed in the host countries. Hybrid identities are created, through a process of adaptation to the host culture and a subsequent reconfiguring of a diaspora's identity (Chambers, 1994; Featherstone, 1996; Friedman, 1999; Lowe, 1991). The creation of a re-shaped hybrid identity inevitably necessitates a re-evaluation of the relationship with the homeland and its significance to identity. For some members of the diaspora subsequent visits to the homeland may reinforce their homeland-identity whilst for others it may heighten their sense of hybridity (Kibria, 2003; Louie, 2004; Stephenson, 2002). The focus of this research concerns the identity of a hybrid diaspora, the Sarawakian-Chinese, focussing on how visits to the 'homeland' of China influence identity formation.

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2. The making of the Sarawakian-Chinese identity

The Sarawakian-Chinese community is primarily located in Kuching in the South West of Sarawak, one of the thirteen states of Malaysia on the island of Borneo. The origins of this diaspora can be traced to the early 19th century (Reid, 1996; Skeldon, 2003) when wars and famine within China caused emigration (Pan, 1999; Wang, 1991, 1994). During the same period, immigration to Sarawak from China was encouraged by the English Governor James Brooke for the purpose of economic expansion (Armstrong & Armstrong, 2001). However, the freedom of movement for the diaspora to return to China ended with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the subsequent 'Closed Door' policy, causing relations with the homeland to be severely restricted and even severed (Chen, 2004). For the following three decades until 1978 and the re-opening of Chinese borders, the global Chinese diaspora was prohibited from returning to China causing the ethnic Chinese to become 'less' Chinese (Suryadinata, 1987). The freedom to travel to China post-1978 has permitted the renewal of contacts between the diaspora and their relatives. The effects of this on the identity is contested, with arguments of it leading to a re-orientation towards China (Nyíri, 1997) being counter-balanced by claims that after three decades of disconnection, the Chinese diaspora's identity has become more heterogeneous and hybridised (Tan, 2001; Tong & Chan, 2001).

In Sarawak, the factors leading to 'more heterogeneous and hybridised' Chinese identities are typically attributed to different education systems and religions (Ong, 1999; Parmer, 2001; Tan, 1988). Several studies have indicated that education plays a critical role in creating and defining the relationship between the hyphenated-communities and the host country, subsequently redefining identity in the national context (Gundara, 1999; Kostovicova & Prestreshi, 2003). A key aspect of why the medium of education can have a significant impact upon identity formation, is that the Chinese, English and Malay systems differ in their values and world-views (Ong, 1999; Parmer, 2001; Tan, 1990). Typically, the Chinese-educated diaspora are more familiar with Chinese civilisation, including philosophy, arts, music, culture, ethics and history than their English-educated counterparts who are more likely to be orientated towards Western philosophy and culture (Chin, 1981; Parmer, 2001; Tan, 1990), whilst those who attended Malay-medium schools are thought to be at least 'partially assimilated' (Parmer, 2001, p. 51) into the Malay culture. However, no research was found that categorised the orientation of the identity of the Sarawakian-Chinese who have attended Malay mediums schools. In summary, the use of language in education would seem to be a significant contributor to the reconfiguration of Chinese identity in Sarawak.

The diaspora embraces a plurality of faiths, including Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity, with a small percentage of the Sarawakian-Chinese having converted to Islam. These traditional Chinese belief systems embrace the practice of ancestor worship, an essential component for encouraging filial piety and the maintenance and renewal of extended family relationships (Wee & Davies, 1999). As for education, adopted religions are influential for creating subcultures of identity that are also associated to social class. Notably a conversion to Christianity is most prominent amongst many of the English-educated Sarawakian-Chinese, leading them to being labelled as 'westernised' and 'de-cultured' by other members of the diaspora (DeBernardi, 2001; Meerwald, 2002). The effect of these differing world-views, values and experiences associated with religion and education has been to create a path of cultural evolution towards sub-identities.

Despite there being differences in religious and educational experiences, Chinese culture emphasises China as the 'Zhunguo', the 'central kingdom' of civilisation and cultural authenticity (Braziel & Mannur, 2003; Parker, 1995; Tu, 1994). Closely tied to the paradigm of the homeland representing the roots of civilisation and authenticity is the discourse of 'essentialism', whose premise is that identity has an essence, possessing fixed cultural and historical traits pre-determined by primordial forces (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). According to essentialism there exists only one form of Chinese identity based upon a tradition of shared physiological, historical and cultural characteristics. These include: a genetic inheritance traceable to the Yellow Emperor; an ability to fluently converse in Mandarin as part of the Chinese linguistic world; the observation of a cultural code of ethics; and an orientation to the homeland as the mother country (Tu, 1991).

Morley and Robins (1995, p. 8) argue that an over-emphasis on the homeland as the point of reference for identity construction promotes 'the absolutism of the pure' and several scholars have de-emphasied this homeland orientation (Clifford, 1997; Falzon, 2003). An alternative perspective to Chinese identity is located within the framework of anti-essentialism, which recognises that identity is continually being reconstructed in response to global forces (Chambers, 1994; Tan, 2004). This perspective places an emphasis on the significance of differing contexts and varied situations in articulating identity (Barth, 1969 Eriksen, 1991), leading to a plurality of identities, including hybridity. The trend toward hybridity is typically reinforced through successive generations of diaspora resulting in identity being tied to 'places' rather than a 'place' (Featherstone, 1996; Friedman, 1999; Lowe, 1991).

3. Tourism and identity

Whilst practices of education, religion and language are acknowledged determinants of diasporas' identities, the relationship of tourism to hybridity and identity formation is comparatively marginalised in the existing literature (Coles & Timothy, 2004). A key theme of the limited number of studies into the motivations of visits to the ancestral homeland is a search for identity re-affirmation and a connection with one's cultural roots, a quest that may re-affirm a sense of belonging that may be absent in the host country (Coles & Timothy, 2004; Duval, 2003; Hall & Williams, 2002). Visits to the homeland may strengthen cultural connections with the past, a place: 'to reflect on the perennial questions of diasporic existence and the individual's relationship to place' (Kelner, 2010, p. 3).

Important to the impact of return visits on the identity of diaspora is how changes that have occurred in the homeland since departure are interpreted and evaluated as Duval (2003, p. 83) comments: 'the essence of measuring change and transformation is really one of comparison and identity negotiation' (2003, p. 289). The outcome of self-evaluation in relation to the culture of the homeland may be disconcerting and challenging, resulting in what Coles and Timothy (2004, p. 13) describe as 'troubling, disconcerting and ambiguous experiences as well as newfound ambivalences.' This process of individual re-evaluation is similarly experienced by the Chinese diaspora returning 'home', a common theme being that those born in Western countries felt themselves to have more of a Western identity than a Chinese one (Kibria, 2003; Louie, 2004). A shared sentiment was that they did not feel a sense of belonging to their homeland, rather a sense of being 'out of place' and 'out of time'. This sentiment was also expressed by the Italian diaspora of Australia returning to Italy, who found that the lifestyle had substantially changed from what they remembered resulting in a reinforced connection with their 'new' home (Thompson, 1980).

In some instances, these ambivalences of feelings and emotions are compounded by the discomfort of the reception and reaction in the ancestral homeland (Stephenson, 2002). For example, African-