



Searching for a sense of place: Identity negotiation of Chinese immigrants



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the identity negotiation experiences of first, second and 1.5 generation Chinese immigrants in Australia. Integration into the Australian larger society requires first generation immigrants to learn or improve their English language skills and adapt to the host cultural practices to the extent possible so that they can be accepted as a member of the mainstream society. Second and 1.5 generation immigrants have the advantage of being well-equipped with knowledge of the host cultural practices and English language skills as they were either born in the host country or migrated at a young age. However, as they grow up, they realize that it is not possible for people with Chinese ancestry to be 100% “Australian”, no matter how well they speak the English language or how closely they follow the Australian way of life. Their physical appearance sets them apart from the Anglo-Australians at first sight. Consequently, they also need to perform to the expectations of both cultural groups, and this is what they do on a daily basis. Drawing upon data from 35 semi-structured interviews with first, second and 1.5 generation Chinese in Australia, this study illustrates that shifted identity, rather than blended identity is favoured by majority of respondents as they navigate through the bicultural environment to “fit in” different contexts. The Findings from this study highlight that identification with a culture does not necessarily suggest belonging to that culture. Identification and belonging are not the same. Those findings are discussed in light of implication for theories on identities and acculturation.

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“We still practise mostly what our parents taught us . . . We think we are more Chinese in Australia but more Australian in China.” (Coffee shop owner who resided in Australia for 14 years; first generation)

“I kind of find myself more Chinese Australian. Obviously, being born in Australia, when I’m along with all my mates I probably tend to feel more Australian . . . In a particular group setting you think of yourself as a chameleon – you just blend in” (Salesperson who was born in Australia; second generation)

“At home, I’m Chinese; I speak the Chinese language, eat Chinese food, and watch Chinese movies and programmes. At work, I’m Australian because I don’t want to be treated as a minority. I want to tell them I’m capable of doing what they are capable of doing.” (Administrative officer who resided in Australia for 13 years; 1.5 generation)

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1. Introduction

The quotes above were among the responses we received when we asked first, second, and 1.5 generation (people who migrated to the host country as a child or an adolescent aged 13–17; Zhou, 1997) Chinese immigrants how they define and negotiate their identities in the bicultural contexts. Identity is at the core of immigrants' acculturation and adaptation. Although integration into the host society occurs at various levels, the fundamental question immigrants need to address is how they define themselves culturally (by ethnic cultural heritage or by national identity or both) and how they relate to others in the host country, in particular, the mainstream cultural group. First generation Chinese immigrants were usually socialized into their home culture before moving to a new culture. Consequently, when they migrated to the host country, most of them had to familiarize themselves with new cultural practices of the host country and to learn to use the host language (e.g., English) effectively and appropriately in different situations in order to be accepted as a member of the mainstream society. Second generation migrants who were born into the host society have the advantage of being well-equipped with knowledge of the host cultural practices and host language proficiency. While socialization into the dominant culture of the host country in public as they grow up helps to develop a feeling that they belong to the nation, a distinct racial difference (e.g., Chinese versus European) and their parents' adherence to the heritage cultural traditions and norms at home constantly remind them of their bicultural background. They are fully aware of the need to move between their heritage and mainstream cultures in order to communicate effectively with their parents in Australia and relatives in China as well as connecting with the mainstream group.

Previous research on the relationship between exposure to bicultural or multicultural environments and identity formation has yielded inconsistent findings. Some studies related multicultural exposure to cultural homelessness because multicultural individuals are subject to conflicting cultural frameworks (Vivero & Jenkins, 1999). Other studies argued that mixed cultural affiliations are conducive to developing a bicultural identity which allows bicultural or multicultural individuals to move between cultures without feeling disoriented (LaFrambois, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). While acculturation literature tends to relate integration with bicultural identity (Berry, 2005), limited studies have advanced our understanding of the process through which bicultural identities are achieved (Ward, 2008). Without knowledge of the process, we cannot account for the mixed findings in the literature. Nor could we explain why some flourish while others flounder in searching for a sense of place in the host country. This study contributes to the literature on process-oriented acculturation research by examining the identity negotiation experiences of different generations of Chinese in Australia as they navigate through the bicultural environment to search for a cultural home.

An in-depth understanding of Chinese immigrants' search for a cultural home is of theoretical and practical importance. The Chinese communities including immigrants from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau are the largest and most vibrant ethnic communities with non-native English speaking background worldwide. One can always find a Chinatown in immigrant receiving countries such as the USA, Germany, UK, Canada, the Netherlands, Australia, and New Zealand, to mention just a few. The estimated total population of Chinese overseas is 40 million (Tan, 2013) across 140 countries. This population size is akin to Poland (38.2 million) and Canada (34.9 million) and almost twice the size of the population of Australia (22 million). In addition to the magnitude, ethnic Chinese communities are further scattered than other non-white ethnic groups and have a wider spread of social class than many other ethnic groups (Benton & Gomez, 2014). Therefore, studies that enhance our understanding of the Chinese ethnic community have the potential of making an important contribution to acculturation research.

2. Identity and identity negotiation

Ethnicity is a key category migrants and their host nationals use to categorize themselves into cultural groups. Cultural identity is defined as the essence of one's self, comprising beliefs, values, worldviews of a group within which such knowledge is shared (Adler, 1997). Scholars agree that a strong cultural identity imparts a sense of belonging to a stable and identifiable social group, providing a frame of reference for thinking, doing and being (Butler-Sweet, 2011). The attachment and pride instilled from "belonging" to any given social group is essential in forming a solid foundation for self-esteem and psychological well-being (Ting-Toomey, 2005). On the other hand, a lack of a sense of belonging has been found to lead to lower self-esteem and cultural homelessness (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009) as well as a perception of reduced control over one's life (Hogg & Abrams, 1999). When cultural transition occurs, as in the case of migrants, the old sense of belonging to a "stable" cultural group usually needs to be negotiated in the new cultural context. For immigrants' descents born and grown up in the bicultural environment (e.g., second generation), negotiating a sense of place in-between cultures is a daily routine. The categories they use to define themselves culturally significantly affect their self-image because those categories symbolically mark the boundaries between the self and the other.

Erving Goffman (1969) defines identity as the way in which the individual manages his or her self-image and performs to the expectations of others in everyday life. The fluid nature of identity has long been recognized in the literature, dating back to the twentieth century when distinguished American sociologist and psychologist Mead (1934), among other earlier researchers in the field, described it as a dynamic process. Identity is not something "given" but is constructed in acts of social interaction (Berger, 1973). Identity negotiation takes place in the context of communicating with others and there are many elements of identity that are intrinsically linked with social expectations and contexts (Hecht, Warren, Jung, Krieger, & Gudykunst, 2005). Social actors use linguistic and other cultural resources in the ongoing construction and reconstruction

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