Living In-Between: Hybrid Identities among Long-Established Australian-Born Chinese in Sydney

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Introduction

The old western idea of ‘being Chinese’ always entailed some form of common racial collectivism. It imagined that ‘Chinese’ inhabited a single cultural space and that Chinese people shared stereotypical physical characteristics. If this one dimensional notion of a uniform ‘Chinese’ identity long satisfied western political and philosophical needs to categorize a foreign people, it was never adequate to encompass the variety of identities it sought to define, especially within a diasporic context. The ‘Chinese’ could equally be qualified historically by internal geographical markers (north, south, east and west) as well as by ‘Australian’, ‘Malaysian’, ‘Philippine’ or ‘American’, with little or no underlying shared consciousness or unified opinions regarding ethnic or cultural identity. More important in the formation of diasporic communities were differences among Chinese people themselves, as revealed by sub-ethnic markers like dialect, dietary preference, and parochial ties to particular provinces or districts within provinces. These are old differences that predate the transnational influences of the contemporary era.

Where long-established diasporic Chinese are concerned, other factors have also influenced their formation of identities. These have included varying perceptions of culture and class, strategic accommodations, at different times, at local, national and transnational levels, and the length of settlement in the host country. As an added complexity, in the modern era of emerging transnational communities globally, cultural practices that help formulate a sense of identity can often intersect to blur the boundaries of place. The interaction of all these factors has created a situation where the construction of identity for migrants and their children often occurs in a state of liminality—that is, of feeling suspended in-between cultures or in borderlands. This factor further undermines any collective notion of a shared Chinese identity among diasporic communities, often imparting “a sense of being a people with historical roots and destinies outside the time/space of the host nation.”

Where Australia is concerned, diasporic Chinese settlement has a long and varied history, with the first large-scale immigration occurring after the discovery of gold in the mid-nineteenth century. In contrast to the largely Cantonese origins of migrants for the first hundred years, in the second half of the twentieth century sub-ethnic diversity spread with growing migrant numbers. Today, Chinese–Australians are highly diverse: Taiwanese, Hong Kong Chinese and Shanghainese are among the fastest growing segments of the Chinese–Australian population. There has also been a general shift

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5 Even though the majority of early migrants were Cantonese their sub-ethnic make-up was diverse. People from districts such as Chungshan, Toishan and Kaoyau were often isolated because of differences in the local dialects they spoke. C. Y. Choi, Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1975), pp. 3–16.
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away from the largely working class origins of the late-nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century Chinese. Although considerable social and economic diversity remains within the Australian–Chinese population today, many post-1965 Chinese immigrants came from professional and highly educated backgrounds. As a result, the contemporary Chinese–Australian community is divided along several socio-economic and cultural fault lines, including that of generational longevity in Australia.

Long-established Australian-born Chinese, the focus of this paper, form a unique group within the broader community of Chinese–Australians, and their negotiations of the ‘Chinese’ element of their identities are inevitably different from other Chinese residing there. However, historically the general tendency has been to treat ‘Chineseness’ and, in a broader sense, ‘Asianness’ as a common unifying factor that connects everyone of Asian descent. Despite an individual’s birthplace, generational longevity, cultural inclination or sense of belonging being grounded in Australia, members of the host community might still routinely subsume them under the homogenising categories of ‘Chinese–Australian’ or ‘Asian–Australian’. The monolithic projection of a stereotyped ‘Chineseness’ always distorted complex and changing Chinese cultural realities, but its persistence over time reified it into a set of widely held assumptions that long-established Chinese had to deal with. More recently, a dialectical tension has also developed within subsequent generations of Australian-born Chinese between their Chinese cultural heritage, with its sense of identity coloured by sub-ethnic influences, and their more recent experiences of a radically changed idea of Chinese identity, one in which nationalist desires for greater modernity and homogeneity simultaneously confront the new realities of transnationalism and a borderless Chinese global community.

All these conflicting impulses and influences make diasporic life potentially fraught with contentions over belonging and difference, resulting in a process of shifting formations of identity that are usually characterized by scholars as ‘hybridity’. Ang, for instance, defines hybridity as “a means of bridging the multiple boundaries which constitute ‘Asian’ and ‘Western’ in identities as mutually exclusive and incommensurable.” The diasporic literature has taken up the idea of hybrid identity construction largely in relation to first and second generation migrants and to the sojourner’s sense of roots in a diasporic setting. Somewhat lost in the debate over Chinese diasporas and identities are the experiences of long-established migrant communities. Their experiences are usually discussed in terms of melting-pot concepts of assimilation and integration that assume ethnic identification decreases over successive generations. For this reason, there has been little scholarly interest in researching the negotiation of identity among the long-established Australian-born Chinese community.

This paper investigates one of the issues obscured by this scholarly neglect, an issue that arose during the course of my wider research project (discussed in the next

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6 H. Gilbert, J. Lo & T. Khoo, Diaspora: Negotiating Asian-Australia (Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 2000).
My paper questions the value of melting-pot theories that assume subsequent generations of migrant families become effectively integrated into the host society and lose any but a symbolic attachment to their ethnicity when applied to the descendants of very early Chinese migrants in Sydney. Do they, as Rivas and Torres-Gil put it, “assimilate and acculturate by the third generation, thus becoming more like members of the dominant population,” or can they still find themselves situated psychologically in a shifting, ambivalent, liminal zone, where a variety of experiences, voices, language, and identities mingle?

My Research Project and its Subjects
Data for this paper derive from my research project which examined the Chineseness of long-established Australian-born Chinese. The project had two major objectives. The first was to deconstruct and re-evaluate the concept of Chineseness by exploring what it takes to be recognised as ‘belonging’ and the social significance of ‘being Chinese’ in different contexts. The second objective was to elucidate the sense of identity among a cohort of long-established Australian-born Chinese in Sydney by examining informants’ conceptions of homeland, their understanding of Chinese community groupings within the Australian context, and the way they situated themselves within these social categories. The term ‘long-established’ distinguishes them as a unique group from the broader community of Chinese–Australians with their diverse historical, political, national, and cultural backgrounds. By emphasizing their generational longevity in Australia, the study could evaluate how their sense of Chineseness impacted on their social positioning among Chinese diasporic groups in Australia. For convenience below, I call those who were born in Australia and have at least one parent also born in Australia (giving three or more generations living in Australia) long-established ABC.

The project involved in-depth interviews with forty-three ABC residing in Sydney. My initial strategy for contacting informants involved identifying relevant social and cultural community organisations there and participating in their activities. Two specific groups were targeted as the initial points of contact, since the majority of their members were long-established ABC. Common to both organisations was that the primary language was English and one of their key aims was to promote the discussion of the history of Chinese communities in Australia. However, that meant the majority of their members were elderly retired people, who felt that, in their later years, they had the freedom from family and work commitments to allow for self-reflection and the time to pursue their interests in these organisations, unlike younger people engaged in the rush of daily living, from career development to parenting. To increase diversity in the...
sample, a second strategy was adopted. This involved advertising the study in places without a particular Chinese cultural focus or Chinese membership, like university student groups, in student magazines, or on hospital or community notice boards at local shopping centres.

Despite all informants’ families having lived in Australia for over three generations, only fourteen of them had mixed ancestry. Of the twenty-six who were or had been engaged in a long-term relationship, barely one-third (nine) involved a Caucasian. This relatively small number of mixed-race individuals probably arose from the selection method which aimed to include individuals with strong feelings about their Chinese heritage as well as those who were indifferent to it. Some participants had initially worried that their sense of Chineseness in everyday life might be inadequate, that they were ‘not Chinese enough’ for the study, but once assured that their social experience would still be important to my research, they agreed to participate. Those who refused to take part said they were not interested in the topic. This highlights a real limitation in the sample, as individuals who declined to be interviewed generally felt that Chinese identity issues did not matter to them because Chineseness played no salient role in their everyday lives. Most such individuals came from interracial family backgrounds. As a result, my sample was generally skewed towards a group that was relatively conscious of their Chinese heritage.

Dividing the sample by gender and age gives the following proportions: twenty-two males and twenty-one females whose age groups ranged from ten aged over 64; twelve aged 45–61; eleven aged 30–44; and ten aged 18–29. In terms of generations distant from China, eleven informants were third generation, twenty-two fourth generation, and ten fifth generation or over. In regard to their educational background, thirty-five had received higher education, seven had completed high school education, and only one did not complete high school. Most of those with tertiary education were professional people ranging across academics, bankers, traders, pharmacists, government officers and librarians. As a whole, their educational attainments, current occupations and suburbs of residency within the Sydney metropolitan area indicate that this sample of long-established ABC generally had middle to high socio-economic status.

Finally, all interviews were conducted in English as it was the primary language spoken in all informants’ home. Only a few could converse fluently in a Chinese dialect.

The interview excerpts used in this paper came from six males and three females from the original forty-three informants. All were at least third generation Australians. Their age range was: two over 64; three aged 45–63, two aged 30–44 and two aged 18–29. Their educational attainments were similar to those in the original sample. To preserve their anonymity, all informants have been given pseudonyms in the discussion that follows.

The qualitative nature, methodological limitations and sample size of my study means it cannot claim to be representative of the experiences of all long-established ABC in Australia. However, by revealing micro-sociological views of multi-generational ABC, I believe it contributes to a deeper understanding of the diasporic experience that extends beyond the provision of quantitative statistics. It also raises questions about identity formation among long-established migrant groups that deserve further scholarly exploration for other such groups. As my interviewees reveal, their lived experience and personal sense of ethnic authenticity is influenced by a complex mix of historical and contemporary factors in which longevity of settlement is only one element. For many of these eighteen ABC, their ‘Chineseness’, as they understand it, continues to form a

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13 This include those who are married, divorced, widowed and in a de facto relationship.
normal part of their lived social reality and of their negotiations of what should be recognised as a hybrid, or in-between, sense of identity.

Not Quite Australian, Not Quite Chinese

As the following interview excerpts show, despite having identities grounded in Australia, family histories or personal experiences could combine to leave individuals feeling situated somewhere in-between what they perceived as the master narratives of ‘white’ Australian and Chinese cultures. While this cohort of ABC are three-to-five, and in one case six, generations removed from their ancestral homeland in China, and thus do not obviously fit into any notion of ‘Chineseness’ based on elements like language ability, racial traits and birthplace, they nevertheless often described a sense of ‘being Chinese’ intermingled in their Australian ways of life. This feeling often started with their families and the importance they placed on the intergenerational transmission of particular Chinese cultural beliefs or traits.

As children, most informants’ parents were conscious of the need to integrate adequately into the mainstream society, yet their parents also actively instilled Chinese culture through their daily life. Ralph, an elderly third generation ABC, recalls his parents’ child rearing during his 1930s childhood:

My parents were strict but they were still Australian oriented. They had old traditional Chinese manners and practiced some Chinese customs. Most of the families, like me, were brought up the same way. We were kind of Westernised but we were still Chinese in some ways.

Similarly Dianne, now a middle aged woman, recalled that as a mother she encouraged both western and Chinese culture in the upbringing of her children in the 1980s: “I wanted them to keep their Chinese traditions, and I also wanted them to embrace Australian traditions as well so that they can be assimilated into society successfully, and I think they’ve done that.”

As these examples show, parents saw the continuation of Chinese culture within the family as an important aspect in the development of their children’s identity, even though they were thoroughly committed to remaining in Australia. Eating rice daily with chopsticks, using Chinese cooking ingredients such as soy sauce, ginger and rice wine, or giving red pocket money on Chinese New Year, were regarded as influential ways of engendering a sense of ‘being Chinese’, as they are seen as signifiers of Chinese culture. For instance, Sandy, now a retired nurse, remembered that, “you would get a smack if you played with chopsticks because it was bad luck and you were not allowed”, while Ralph recalled the importance Chinese families placed on the proper celebration of lunar New Year during his pre-World War II childhood: “When we were young, Chinese boys use to go around to different Chinese families to get red packets. In 1936–37 two pounds is more than a week’s wage. It’s big money! It doesn’t take much for a boy to do that.”

Most of these informants continued to carry out such typical Chinese practices in their own family in adult life. At a deeper level, parents would instil traditional Chinese ideologies such as filial piety and the value of educational attainment in their children. These values and practices were internalized from a young age and remain guiding principles that give meaning to their lives. Values, customs and practices of this sort fundamentally informed all nine interviewees’ ideas of what ‘Chineseness’ meant for them.
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If family is an obvious site for fostering a sense of Chinese identity among subsequent generations by parental inculcation of certain culturally-specific behaviours, a feeling of ‘being Chinese’ could also be reinforced by social networks and by relations with friends who shared similar hobbies, sports, interests and moral values. But because the wider society was not Chinese, extra-familial relationships could also import outside perspectives and stereotypes of what it meant to be ‘Chinese’ into the identity formation of individuals. The resulting tension between values and practices authenticated by the family and the one-dimensional stereotypical expectations of outsiders can create tension between different sites of identity formation. For some ABC the result has been to feel themselves as not quite real, or ‘fake’, Chinese. This is exemplified by Jenny, a young sixth generation ABC. Although she has many Caucasian friends, Jenny also associates closely with Chinese through her family, university and workplace networks. In our discussion about her sense of comfort with westerners and Chinese, she stated that she feels more at ease with the latter because of their similar cultural backgrounds, social values and morals. However, at the same time she feels she does not fit in fully because she cannot speak and write Chinese. Instead she consciously located herself in-between the western and Chinese communities: “I don’t feel I fit into the Chinese community, but I don’t really feel like I fit into the white community either. I sort of feel I am floating in-between but I am okay with it.”

This ‘in-between’ sense of identity is even more clearly illustrated by Marco, an investment analyst of a similar age to Jenny. Marco left Australia for Hong Kong during his primary schooling but returned to Sydney in the senior years of high school:

When I came to Australia there was just a growing realization that to be an Australian is to be more than just where you were born—although it is a birthright, but it’s also where you were brought up, where you can sort of identify strongly with particular values... I guess it’s where you can identify more, and I don’t identify with Australia as strongly compared with someone who was brought up here and who can name their favourite football club or the entire cricket team! I mean, I can only name three or four players! So it’s really hard to identify myself as Australian but I’m certainly not someone who can really identify strongly with Hong Kong either ... as in the mainstream local Hong Kong person who can speak the language very fluently and who primarily uses a Cantonese language.

Marco’s experience suggests that he too feels located in a liminal or in-between zone. Although partly raised in Hong Kong as a youngster he failed to connect closely with Hong Kong culture because his international school primarily used English as the language of tuition and its students were mostly English and American. Yet when he returned to Australia in high school he also felt distant from aspects of the Australian way of life that a teenage male might regard as critical for creating a sense of belonging within his peer group. The sense of alienation created at that vulnerable time must have been painful, for years later Marco was still projecting a one-dimensional stereotype to describe his understanding of Australian identity for those born and raised in the country (the ability to name all members of the national cricket team). In reality, many mainstream Australians raised in the country could only name the same number of cricket players as Marco, but this fact was unable to change a feeling of not quite fitting in that earlier experiences had deeply impressed on him. The experience of growing up without a strong sense of collective identification left Marco feeling outside the mainstream of both Chinese and Australian identities, as he understood them, leaving him suspended in a zone of liminality.
If Marco’s experience suggests this result can be personally uncomfortable, for others the ability to choose between different stores of ethnic and cultural knowledge and behaviours, according to the requirements of the situation, is an advantage. As Pete, a middle aged academic, explained it:

You identify yourself situationally, but basically I am Australian, sometimes Australian Chinese. It depends on what you want to present yourself as and what the context is. If people are interested in your Chineseness then you respond in that kind of way.

Nelson, a younger fourth generation ABC, basically agreed with Pete about the appropriation of cultural values according to contextual significance:

I think of myself as a mixture of both. Western culture in general is driven by Christianity, so I am religious. Well I also believe in a higher being, whether it be Buddha or God, Allah, Jesus Christ or whatever. I also live by the Chinese way of thinking. Sometimes it clashes, so what do I follow? I apply whatever value I think is appropriate at the time.

As Nelson’s comment reveals, this switching between identities is not a simple oscillation from one to the other but can be a complex interaction of varying influences. Certainly switching between ethnic identities, or what linguists term code-switching, is contextual; however, lived cultural boundaries are dynamic and can therefore often be unclear and ambiguous. For this reason, despite their birth and their families’ long-term residence in Australia, these ABC can often find themselves moving between alternating zones of Chinese, Australian and liminal identities in ways that may not always be clear-cut.

Although some informants felt at ease presenting whichever cultural identity best suited the occasion, for others an alienating sense of otherness always separated them from the mainstream community. Jonathan, a middle-aged third generation ABC, explained that, although the majority of his friends are westerners and he was in a long-term relationship with an Anglo-Australian, it is still impossible for him to feel fully integrated into Australian society:

I did have one suicide attempt at twenty-four [that is, in the 1970s]. There was so much pressure living in the white world and living in the yellow world and being nowhere ... It's only the last five years that I can actually go into an RSL club because in my time after a few drinks some people there would turn around and shout at you, “Ah you fucking Jap! What are you fucking doing here?” The feeling you get is, 'what are you doing in our world?' Ooh, white man's territory. It used to be like that, but not anymore.

Although he sees himself as Australian, with his life and social networks strongly grounded in Australia, Jonathon still feels the pain of being viewed many years before through a prism of otherness that focused and reinforced hostile racial stereotypes, and applied them indiscriminately to whoever they seemed to fit, however inappropriate to the individual involved. Although Jonathon only reported this behaviour among some drinkers in the Returned Services’ League club, most likely men of an older generation for whom this sort of racial ignorance and hostility had been strongly magnified by their experiences fighting the Japanese during the Second World War, it symbolized for him a painful sense of his exclusion from key activities in “white man’s territory”.

14 Returned servicemen are those who fought overseas, principally in World War II and the Vietnam War.
Janice, a bank teller in her forties, goes further. Her sense of identity is largely constructed through awareness of difference from the Australian way of life and personal identification as Asian:

> When I was at school there were hardly any Asians in my class, there were probably none! So all my friends were Australians. But I have always realized that not only did I eat different food but I had a different lifestyle! I have always moved towards an Asian lifestyle. Maybe they always liked the beach, sports, swimming and stuff like that, but we weren’t that style of people. Maybe we always had that problem because we looked Asian. There was a lot of name calling when we were growing up as there weren’t many Asians around. Basically we just stuck to ourselves, we just didn’t mix very well … so when I got older I gravitated back to Asian people or even just with Australian-born Chinese who thought similar.

If a sense of otherness could differentiate long-established ABC in my cohort from majority ‘white’ Australians, few associated themselves as fully as Janice with Chinese or Asian communities in Australia. Rather, most informants felt that they are different from other ‘Chinese’ groups in Australia as well. Rob, a middle aged librarian, highlighted this as he recalled a conversation with his Hong Kong-born wife, who had migrated to Australia as a child in the 1960s:

> My wife says, “You are pretending to be Chinese and you are talking about things you don’t know anything about. You are trying to take the best of both worlds. You are trying to be Australian but you are trying to be Chinese at the same time.”

Although racialized collectivities are often stratified through the stereotypical identities imposed by the mainstream society, in-group members can also play an important role in establishing an internal hierarchy of identities, legitimating some and delegitimizing others, as Rob’s Hong Kong-born wife is doing here to his personal sense of Chinese identity. Such a reaction is often percolated from a powerful discourse of authenticity seeking to establish and police fixed and essentialized definitions of cultural identity. Rob’s personal journey of identity formation is worth recording here. During his schooling, Rob was frequently ostracized by other Australian kids because of his Chinese appearance and small built. This taught him that being regarded as Chinese was a negative attribute in the wider society and so, to create a sense of belonging, he consciously thought of himself as Australian and dissociated himself from everything Chinese. However, a trip to Hong Kong after university made him realize “it is OK to be Chinese”. This realization led him to openly identify himself as Chinese. Rob now celebrates Chinese festivals such as Ching Ming and Chinese New Year, upholds Chinese values such as filial piety, has made several visits to China to search for his family roots, enjoys learning about the history of Chinese settlement in Australia, and is an active member of several Chinese community organisations. However, because he does not speak Chinese, was not born in China and has an interracial family background, his wife—who does not share any of these attributes—teases him for being ‘not a real Chinese’. This situates Rob in a state of limbo. As with Rob’s case, the claims to “Chineseness” made by other long-established ABC in my study were also often regarded as lacking substantial cultural content and as being culturally empty, even though, as their statements reveal, their sense of being Chinese, and of personal authenticity, actually plays a significant role in their lives.15

Conclusion

Melting-pot or assimilationist assumptions that portray the cultural integration of subsequent migrant generations as a more or less single, linear and unidirectional process are routinely applied to the description of identity formation among long-established migrant groups. What my interviews with an admittedly small sample of long-established ABC have shown is that, although they can feel quite a strong sense of identity and belonging in Australia, the experiences they relate do not fit within a model of weakening ethnicity or of a progressively assimilationist path to ‘complete’ integration within the majority community. Instead, the formation of identity between generations takes place as part of an on-going process in which certain aspects of the ‘original culture’ are maintained or reclaimed, while other norms and expectations of the previous generation are selectively modified, resisted or discarded. In this manner, subsequent generations are reconstructing hybridized forms of Chineseness in ways of their own choosing, ways that are relevant, meaningful and hence authentic to their own self-identifications.

17 L. Ngan, “Generational Identities through Time: Memories and Homelands of the ABCs,” in At Home in the Chinese Diaspora: Memories, Identity and Belonging, eds. A. Davidson and K. E. Kuah-Pearce (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2007), Ch. 5.