# Happy to be somewhere in the middle? Belonging among second-generation Chinese immigrants in London

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## Acknowledgements

## Abstract

*This paper investigates the link between language and belonging focusing on young second-generation Chinese immigrants in London. This in turn seeks to answer the question whether language usage potentially increases or hinders belonging to the UK. In reference to existing literature, language is perceived as a gateway to acceptance in creating a unified monolithic cultural identity, potentially creating an identity crisis among the second-generation immigrant youth. Methodologically, this paper is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with six British-Chinese students. By allowing for a snapshot in understanding the experiences of the participants, the hypothesis is that both the preference and frequency of using either Mandarin, Cantonese or English has an impact on shaping one's identity in terms of cultural belonging. The interviews conducted highlighted that language preference is context-dependent as well as that the frequency of speaking Chinese impacted the participants' sense of cultural belonging.*

## Key words:

*Second-generation, immigrant, Chinese, belonging, language, identity*

## Introduction

Immigrant families face both opportunities and challenges when they attempt to fit into an unfamiliar culture from distinct cultural backgrounds. For second-generation immigrants, who were born or moved to Britain at an early age, their experiences of adjusting to a new and unfamiliar culture, language and social environment is also different compared to their parents.

Therefore, this paper addresses the question:
### *'Does the ability and motivation of speaking Chinese affect the belonging of second-generation Chinese immigrants in London?'*

Our research throws light on the unique situation of second-generation Chinese immigrants in London and the role of language as a carrier of culture.

This paper is determined to investigate how second-generation immigrants are influenced by early immigration. Language is used as the primary focus as it is an important aspect of one's identity as a communicative function. Although there is substantive literature investigating the reasons behind language preference among second-generation immigrants, our research contributes extensively on the consequences of language preferences. This paper has particular focus on the relationship between how language motivations have an impact on one's sense of cultural belonging. The research is based in London as it is a culturally diverse metropolis with particular focus on Chinese immigrants due to their increasing presence in London.

## Literature Review

Language is a salient factor to consider within the context of second-generation Chinese immigrants. When observing the context of national belonging the role of language shifts (Fishman, 1966: 25). This is an important factor to consider as language shifts are the asymmetrical increase in using one language over another, due to the pressures of assimilating to the host country. This is applicable in the broader context of cultural identity as Britishness encompasses a sense of inclusion through values. Despite this, Britishness is simultaneously exclusive due to its emphasis on being an identity which is primary, which ignores the multiplicity of one's ethnic identity. For Verkuyten (2007 in Nandi and Platt, 2014) identity is an abstract process in which 'different identities…reinforce one another, rather than exclude other [identities]' (2014: 1). This is significant in relation to second-generation immigrants, who are negotiating

opposing identities. This was found in Portes and Zhou (1993) who recognised the difficulty in maintaining a unified singular identity due to the 'conflicting social and cultural demands' in an 'unfamiliar and hostile world' (1993: 78). Looking at existing literature on cultural identity was useful in operationalising belonging; framing it through cultural events.

Another aspect concerns the role of language as a gateway to acceptance (Portes and Hao, 2002). In relation to understanding language usage, the role of external pressures in defining one's own ethnic identity is an important sphere to consider when evaluating the frequency of languages used. Vedder (2005), investigated the presence of ethnic identity as a contributing factor towards creating a dual sense of belonging by adopting the parents' native culture and self-expression of host culture. The incorporation of ethnic identity in correspondence with language is useful in framing language as a cultural anchor- acting as a bridge between two contrasting cultures. In this context, it is Britishness and Chinese values. Using ethnic identity allowed for our research to examine how dominant British culture manifests itself in different forms, noticeably through language preferences and cultural identity.

DeCaupa and Wintergerst (2009) identified the difference between language shifts and motivations, applicable towards Chinese bilinguals in the West. Their study was primarily focused on German mothers' techniques in maintaining German in a predominantly English speaking environment. Despite being overtly hostile to other languages, there was a sense of preservation in learning their parents' native language which reinforced positive attitudes towards being German. Such emphasis on maintaining cultural identity through language was further reiterated by Zhang (2010). Through the 'use of in-depth interviews with 18 Chinese immigrant families' (2010: 46), Zhang later found that the persistent use of English was seen as essential tool for being seen as "American" and removing their status as a foreigner. Although the participants would converse with their parents in Mandarin, many were reluctant to speak it outside of the family. This demonstrates a strong sense of duality among the participants in negotiating their identities in wanting to feel more culturally "American". This was exercised through the participants of whom had a stronger preference towards speaking English. This illustrates the tensions that are present in both retaining parents' culture through language with societal acceptance.

Finally, when looking at language, it is important to consider peer group relations especially in the context of friendships. For Bakalian (1993, in Phinney et al, 2000), there was a strong emphasis in broadening one's social contacts through meeting people from different backgrounds. This is further developed by Alba (2000, in Phinney

et al, 2000) in which allowed people to express their ethnicity. Nonetheless, it is also useful to consider in-group exclusivity. Despite the motivation in people wanting to mix with dissimilar others, there is a tendency for people to associate themselves with similar others. This is because people 'tend to identify with others who they share characteristics that are relatively rare in context' (McGuire, 1984 in Mehra et al 1998: 442). This is important to consider as group identity influences one's sense of self. Through understanding the role of friendships operationalised through language preferences, is a key indicator in determining one's reasonings surrounding the context-dependent use of different languages.

Although existing studies have already been undertaken which have used semi-structured interviews, our research seeks to add a new dimension through capturing the second generation Chinese immigrants' own experiences of how they view their identity. By understanding their motivations in re-aligning themselves with two distinct identities, with language being used as a cultural anchor in preserving parents' culture. Overall, the literature presented provides a complex narrative examining the role of personal choice in relation to language usage, which heavily influences a sense of national belonging among Chinese students. It will be interesting to see if the struggle for integration is present among second generation Chinese immigrants who currently reside in London. This is due to the prominent multiculturalism that exists within London, which lacks an overarching, unified identity.

## Methodology

The method that was used was individual semi-structured interviews. This method is justified due to investigating the personal nature of subjective experiences. Through the use of interviews allowed the participants to open up and speak more about their personal experiences through 'following up interesting responses and investigating underlying responses' (Robson, 2009 in Hofisi et al., 2014: 64). The participants were allowed to express issues that were significant to them.

An interview guide was created, (see Appendix 1) which included factors concerning language use, family upbringing and cultural events. The questions that were asked concerned one's sense of cultural identity and language preference. Creating an interview guide allowed for a sense of direction within the interview itself as it avoided deviation from the central topic of the investigation. In addition, the guide acted as a prompt and allowed the participant to open up more. In order to preserve anonymity, all the interviewees were made anonymous. The semi-structured interviews lasted 28

minutes, and each participant was allowed to stop the interview at any time or refuse to answer any question.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants, which was based upon the availability of participants. They were searched through multiple ways which included using social networks and contacting other subject departments. Due to the small number of participants and the time constraints, the sample was not representative of the broader Chinese second-generation population in London.

The interviews were recorded for transcription purposes. Although time-consuming, it was important as it allowed for an in-depth understanding of the data. The transcription method that was used was verbatim, which was important for preserving the authenticity of the respondents' answers. Thematic analysis was used in order to dissect the respondent's answers, through using a coding framework (Attride-Stirling, 2004). This was exercised through the dissection of quotations and single words, which was useful in identifying both similarities and differences in the answers given by the different participants.

## Data and Analysis

*Language and Belonging:*

All participants said that they spoke both English and Chinese, however, their proficiency in Chinese varied. There seems to have been a strong desire among most of the parents of the participants for their children to speak Chinese. As expressed by participant 7:

> *"My parents really wanted me to learn Chinese. I did feel a pressure from my parents to speak more Chinese, they would encourage me to speak Chinese at home, but I was really reluctant to, because I found it easier to use English."*

While some felt more comfortable using and speaking Chinese to friends, parents and family members, others said that although they spoke some Mandarin, their first language was English. Those that felt much more confident in English were more likely to only speak conversational Chinese to their parents, which is reaffirmed by Zhang (2010) as the participants would only speak to family in Chinese. Participant 7 reported that his parents spoke to him in Chinese but that he often answered them in English. Many of the participants felt that their Chinese was getting worse as they did not speak it as often as they used to when they lived at home with their family.

When asked about which factors influenced their choice of language when speaking to other second-generation Chinese friends as well as other Chinese friends in London, most answered that they did not mind speaking either language and had no problems switching between the two languages. However, some felt that it was easier to have deep conversations in Chinese, while others in English, explaining that the language they were used to having deep conversations in either with their friends or family members was also the language they felt more comfortable with.

There seems to be a clear relation among the participants between their proficiency and the frequency for which they spoke Chinese and their sense of belonging to the UK. While the participant who spoke Chinese to her friends and family felt a strong belonging to China, the participant who only spoke English to her family and friends, considered herself to be British. Similarly, participants that spoke both languages regularly expressed a sense of belonging to both countries. As expressed by one participant (participant 2):

> "When I was younger, I struggled as I did not know where I belonged. But then as I grew up, I started thinking "Why do I have to belong to just one place? Can I not belong to both places? Or to none of them - but a place in between both cultures?"

Participant 2 also expressed a sense of pride of being able to master both languages and of being able to draw from both cultures:

> "It has opened me up to more possibilities… so I don´t want to limit myself to just one side… I can see the good and bad in both cultures and accept both, and feel more comfortable when I know I belong to both. So I don't force myself on one side, and I am very happy to be somewhere in the middle or belonging to both"

*Friends and Belonging:*

Most of the participants explained that while most of their friends from secondary school were British, they had made more international and second-generation Chinese friends when starting university.

Some of the participants pointed out that when making friends it was not nationality that mattered, but the fact of having similar interests and personalities. As participant 7 pointed out:

"*I don´t really judge friends by the ethnicity they have.*"

While most participants had mostly international friends, one participant had mainly Chinese friends, admitting that she felt that it was easier to connect with Chinese students, as they had more in common, while another had no Chinese friends. Participant 2 explained that although she did have a couple of close European friends, she felt that she was a lot closer and had "*much more in common*" with other Asian students or second generation Chinese students. She stressed that her friends from Korea, Malaysia, Japan as well as other second-generation students all shared similar experiences, and thus she felt that "*on the broader sense we have something in common.*" She maintained that it was "*easier to respond to each other*" as they had "*some sort of connection.*" This reinforced McGuire's (1984) notion that people would tend to befriend peers of whom shared similar cultural experiences.

There seems to be a trend among the nationality of the participant´s friends and the participant´s sense of belonging to China and the UK. Participant 1 who did not have any Chinese friends, said she felt a strong sense of belonging to the UK, explaining that she was born and raised here, and only visits China every two years. On the other hand participant 4 who had more Chinese friends as she felt much more comfortable being around Chinese friends, expressed a clear sense of belonging to China. Similarly, those that reported that they had mainly international friends, felt that they were "*stuck between two cultures*", using words and expressions such as "*grey area*", "*in between two cultures*" and "*cosmopolitan*" when attempting to describe their sentiments.

Some participants expressed that while their British friends saw them as very Chinese, their relatives in China perceived them as acting and behaving in a very British way. Participant 2 said that she would always have a "*Chinese answer*" to her British friend´s questions, as for example when her classmates would talk about what they had for dinner. Hence, they would therefore only see the Chinese side of her, which contrasted with the way her relatives in China saw her. Thus, this suggests that the peer´s perspective of them might influence their feeling of belonging. Hence, one might ask whether it the participant´s friends that reinforces their sense of belonging to either China or the UK, or the other way round.

<u>*Cultural practices:*</u>

In the interviews we have conducted, the perceptions and feelings to traditional Chinese festival celebrations vary greatly. In general, all the participants celebrate at least

Chinese New Year, but only 2 out of 6 could name other traditional Chinese festivals, and just one of them had the relevant knowledge of the history and origin behind the festivals.

Participant 4 clearly expressed the significance of traditional Chinese cultural events to her identity. She said,

> '*Chinese New Year is very important for me, I live on campus but I'll definitely travel back to my home to celebrate it with my family; you know, people have video chat now but it cannot replace family gathering*'.

She mentioned that because her parents always put great emphasis on Chinese culture, she feels a sense of belonging to China as a result of her parents' influence. Thus, in some cases, children's sense of belonging is cultivated in the family.

More often, participants celebrated festivals in superficial ways. For participant 1, her family kept some of the traditions such as cooking Chinese cuisine and watching the Chinese New Year Show, but it is not as important as Christmas for her family. This indicates a cultural transition from the home country to the host country, and leads to a stronger sense of belonging to the British culture.

Similarly, participant 6 said sometimes that celebration is limited to a dinner at a Chinese restaurant with friends because there is no official holiday in UK. Participant 5 also argued that the festive atmosphere such as music, TV commercials, street decorations are more important reasons for her to celebrate a festival. But surprisingly, most of them still admit a stronger sense of belonging to China than to UK, and many of them pointed out that celebrating festivals stays on the surface level of appreciating Chinese culture, and '*have little contribution to their identity*'. It could be argued that the passion about celebrating Chinese festivals is one way to demonstrate their sense of belonging, but it is not sufficient to indicate one's sense of belonging through festivals because no official holiday and less cultural environment as well.

Participants were also asked about their preferences in terms of language for books, movies and music. The main obstacle for choosing the Chinese version seems to be the difficulty of understanding the language, but once they are proficient in Chinese, the participants show no obvious preference. Interestingly, participant 3 said, '*the more I'm exposed to western culture, the more I appreciate my own culture*'; she identifies herself as in the middle of two cultures with slight inclination towards Chinese culture.

None of the participants regard themselves as having a completely singular identity, they are more willing to say they are standing between two different cultures and more inclined to either one. Thus, this confirms the literature that second-generation immigrants often negotiate different identities, rather than maintaining a unified singular one.

## **Limitations**

The main limitation of this paper concerned the time constraints as the brief duration of the project meant that we were not able to have a wide selection of participants. Therefore, by having a longer time frame would be beneficial in accumulating more participants with different socioeconomic backgrounds which would allow for even richer data.

## **Conclusion**

This paper found that second-generation immigrants' sense of belonging is dependent on many factors, noticeably both language proficiency and motivation in using Chinese. The most notable factor concerns the context in which greatly determined one's preference in speaking Chinese or English, with Chinese being restricted to the family sphere. Also, those that were not as fluent in neither Mandarin and Cantonese felt more British, there were exceptions, as some participants felt more Chinese regardless of language.  The investigation also found that friendship groups often influenced one's sense of belonging as those who expressed a dual British and Chinese identity had many non-Chinese friends and did not choose friends based on cultural background. For further research, looking at older Chinese second-immigrants would be of great interest in seeing whether similarities in answers occur overtime.

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# Appendix 1- Interview Guide

## DEMOGRAPHY

Tell me a bit about yourself?
1. How old are you?
2. What is your occupation?

## LANGUAGE USE

Could you tell me a bit about yourself in terms of languages etc that you speak?
1. Which languages do you speak?
2. What is your first language?
3. Where are you from?

### *More in-depth questions:*
3. Tell me about your experiences of speaking Chinese?
4. Can you read or write Chinese? How confident are you in Chinese?
5. How did you learn to read and write Chinese? (did you learn it as a child?/who did you learn it from?/do you feel confident speaking Chinese?)
6. How often do you speak Chinese and who do you speak Chinese to?
7. What motivates you to speak Chinese or not speak Chinese when you have a choice? (follow up with examples and why question: can you think of any situations in which you chose not to speak Chinese?)
8. Where are your friends from? (follow-up: if you have mostly Chinese/British/other friends, why?)

## NATIONAL BELONGING

1. Do you celebrate Chinese cultural events? Which ones? Why not?
2. How do you celebrate them? (who do you celebrate them with, and how often?)
3. How important are Chinese cultural events to you?
4. What sort of music, books and movies to you read/watch/listen to?
5. Is that in Chinese/English? Why/why not? (Follow-up: why do you prefer Chinese/English books/movies/music?)

## FAMILY

6. Can I ask you some questions about your family? If yes -> How well do your parents speak English?
7. Do you feel a part of London? If so why? if not why not?

8. Would you say the same for your parents?
9. Why did your family move to the UK?


Do you have any questions for me?

Do you have anything else to add?