# EXPLORING THE PROCESSES OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG CHINESE IMMIGRANT PARENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS IN MONTREAL

Holding an undergraduate degree in English language and literature from Wuhan University, China, **Lingwei Qian** moved to Canada in 2012 for her Master's studies in the department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. Qian positioned herself as a researcher "in the middle", neither an insider nor an outsider, but someone standing on the borderline between the two in her Master's thesis which explored the identity construction processes among the Chinese immigrants in Montreal. As a culture enthusiast, Qian continues her research in the fields of cultural identity theory, multiculturalism, and immigration studies.

**This qualitative inquiry describes and analyzes the contrasts and interrelationships among the pathways through which Chinese immigrant parents and immigrant young adults construct their identities in a context of Quebec's Interculturalism Policy. In order to understand the lived experiences of the Chinese immigrants from their perspectives, I conducted 15 in-depth, face-to-face individual interviews with both the parents and young adults from five Chinese immigrant families living in Montreal since the 1990s. This inquiry aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics and complexity of identity construction.**

In Canada, "Chinese-Canadian" has been a term commonly used to describe people of Chinese origin who hold Canadian nationality. The term also refers to the Chinese community across all of Canadian society. However, does this term necessarily entail a singular collective identity? I doubt it. The Chinese immigrants in Canada are not homogeneous. They consist of people who arrived during different time periods, from different regions and cultural backgrounds, with different motivations and individual repertoires. These differences existing among Chinese immigrants inevitably influence the paths through which they construct their identities. Hall (1990) characterizes identities as the unstable points of identification, which are "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (p. 225). In addition to race, ethnicity, and nationality, the construction process is also intertwined with other aspects of identification including class, gender, age, religion, as well as language. The heterogeneity within the Chinese immigrant population, coupled with the fluid and dynamic nature of identity, consequently makes the identity construction process complex and problematic, which defies any sweeping generalizations.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this qualitative inquiry, I focused on two specific categories of Chinese immigrants: those who immigrated to Montreal from mainland China in the 1990s being one, and their children who were born in mainland China but moved to Montreal during early childhood being the other. Chinese immigrants arriving in Canada in the 1990s were mostly admitted through the points system as economic class immigrants. With high educational qualifications and professional skills, they were selected by Canadian government as potential labour force for Canada's knowledge-based economy.



I aimed to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics and complexity of identity construction. I also wished to gain insights into the differences and interrelationships between the pathways through which Chinese immigrant parents and immigrant young adults construct their identities, with a special attention given to the context of Quebec's Interculturalism. My research questions are:

- What labels do Chinese immigrant parents and young adults living in Montreal use to identify themselves and in what situations?
- What meanings do they attach to those self-identified labels?
- What are the major factors they perceive as influential to their identity construction?
- Are there any noticeable differences between immigrant parents' and young adults' perceptions of their identification?

## METHODS OF INQUIRY

In order to understand the lived experiences of the Chinese immigrants from their perspectives, I conducted 15 in-depth, face-to-face individual interviews with both the parents and young adults from five Chinese immigrant families living in Montreal. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour, during which we explored themes including: *1)* meanings attached to identity labels, *2)* impacts of social recognition and nonrecognition, *3)* intergenerational dynamics in identity construction *4)* cultural diversity and language policy, and *5)* the shaping of identity under globalization. Throughout the interviews, I kept alert (paid close attention?) to the emergence of new themes that I failed to cover initially. I made space for the newly emerged (might have to check again) themes by adapting my interview questions accordingly. To minimize the factors that may hinder a free flow of ideas, I let participants choose whichever language — English or Mandarin — they felt most comfortable using during the interviews. I audiotaped, and later transcribed each interview. For the interviews conducted in Chinese, I translated them into English. (I translated the interviews conducted in Mandarin into English.)

## DISCUSSIONS

### MEANINGS OF "BEING CHINESE" AND "BEING CANADIAN"

The dialogues with participants reveal the fact that people who share the same cultural background, face the same life situations, and even live under the same roof can interpret the same thing differently. Labels are static, while identification is a highly individualized, dynamic and ongoing process of meaning-making. Labels can be captured and measured, but a nuanced understanding of identity construction requires the intersubjective exchange between researcher and participants. Participants have made me realize that, rather than remaining bogged down in the question of labels, I should place more emphasis on the specific ways that participants perceive, interpret, and manifest their identities.

Reflecting on their lived experiences, participants reveal a common sentiment that both "being Chinese" and "being Canadian" are important elements constituting their overall identities. None of them have encountered a severe identity crisis, which is usually characterized by a loss of anchoring points that results from some irreconcilable conflicts between one's Chinese and Canadian identities. For participants, these two elements coexist, intersect, and sometimes counterbalance rather than preclude one another.

However, a similar sentiment does not entail the same interpretation of their identities. Both similarities and variations are observable in their individual definitions of "being Chinese" and "being Canadian". Most participants consider certain racial and seemingly natural characteristics such as their physical appearance, surnames, language and birthplace as the defining markers of their Chinese identity. But what contributes to the development and maintenance of a Chinese identity is an endorsement of Chinese cultural values, the most common being hard work and family bonds.

At the same time, participants also emphasize the importance of not completely conforming to Chinese cultural norms. On the one hand, they reject the anachronistic elements of traditional Chinese culture, such as the absolute parental authority; on the other hand, they embrace the desirable aspects of Canadian culture such as gender equality. A profound emotional attachment to China is the major point differentiating the Chinese immigrant parents from their children. For the immigrant parents, an invisible thread transcends the geographical boundary, binds them closely to their homeland, and serves to maintain their strong sense of being Chinese. But such an emotional attachment to China is not evident among the immigrant young adults. The young adults tend to associate their Chinese identity more with their parents and their Chinese-style upbringing.

Common to participants is a positive feeling of being Canadian. The positive feeling is related to the good global reputation that Canada enjoys. The immigrant young adults demonstrate their pride and appreciation for being members of a country that respects cultural differences and promotes cultural diversity. Not being involved with their host country as much as their children, the immigrant parents equate their Canadian identity with Canadian citizenship whose utility and practicality are emphasized. In their conceptual-

ization, Canada is the concrete "home" where their everyday family life takes place, as contrasted with China, their "homeland", which lives mostly in memory and imagination. Both the immigrant parents and young adults observe the lack of a unified national identity in Canada, but the explanations offered by them differ. Hyphenation, as in Chinese-Canadian, is considered by the young adults as the key characteristic of Canadian identity. When the diversity of cultural expressions is valued and promoted, a national identity then seems inessential. For the parents, the fact that they are socializing primarily within their own ethnic group and that they are not fully integrated into Canadian society makes it difficult for them to develop a Canadian national sentiment.

## INTERPLAY BETWEEN SELF AND OTHER IN IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES

As Noble, Poynting and Tabar (1999) point out, the construction of cultural identity is a "dialectical interplay between self-identification and the identification by others, and of perceptions and structural forces" (pp. 30-31). The perceptions of identity that participants have shared in the interviews are the result of a long process of constructing, negotiating, and transforming themselves through their lived experiences. The process is still ongoing. Participants show that identity is relational and contextual. It is through the tensions and comparisons between different Chinese groups — the Chinese in China, the Chinese adult immigrants in Canada, and the Canadian-born Chinese — that participants determine how to position themselves. Such negotiations of sameness and difference can occur frequently within the immigrant families and between the two generations. During the dynamic process of identity construction, the identifications by other people prove to be a significant factor that influences participants' self-identifications. For example, many immigrant young adults express the feeling that they are more Canadian than Chinese when they are in China. Without sufficient language competence in Chinese, their Chinese identity is not recognized by people in China who claim to be authentic Chinese. Consequently, when defining their Chinese identity, these young adults purposefully distinguish themselves from the population in China. The immigrant parents face a situation different from their children. The racial, ethnicity-based stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination that they have experienced in Canada continue to evoke and reinforce their identity as Chinese. One thing worth noting is that while the immigrant parents consider their Chinese appearance as the identity marker that inevitably entails their permanent membership in a racial and ethnic category inferior to white people, the immigrant young adults perceive the physical features of Chinese as natural and neutral. These young adults have not revealed a hint of being treated less fairly and equally than their white peers.

## LIVING WITH MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Participants demonstrate the multiple identities that they are living with in their everyday lives. Most participants prioritize the identities tied to family roles and occupations rather than their Chinese and Canadian identities. These multiple identities are closely and intricately intertwined with each other. When the values and beliefs associated with their multiple identities contradict each other, participants choose to relax and reset the boundaries of the relevant cultural spaces so as to reach a cohesive sense of self. The multiple identities that they possess can also constrain or reinforce one another. From participants' lived experiences, it is clear that the professional and parental identities that many consider as most salient to them can have an indirect but significant impact on the construction and reconstruction of their sense of being Chinese as well as being Canadian.

## BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF A TRILINGUAL LIFE

The influences of language on identity construction are also revealed by participants through discussions of their trilingual lives. These influences have three aspects. First, language is perceived as a marker of identity that in part determines participants' identifications by others. For example, the Chinese identity is often authenticated by Chinese language competence under the dominant discourse in both China and Canada. The process of authentication may result in participants' experiences of recognition and non-recognition, which greatly affects the ways that they perceive themselves. Second, especially for Chinese immigrant parents, it is the lack of proficiency in English and French — the official languages of Canada — which to a great extent hinders their career advancement and development. Career fulfillment is among the top factors in a person's overall satisfaction with life, without which participants can hardly develop a strong sense of belonging to Canada. However, it needs to be pointed out that many participants attribute their career-related obstacles to the strict language policy in Quebec, rather than French language per se. Third, participants' language skills substantially influence the composition of their social networks. Having insufficient fluency in the language(s) predominantly spoken in a society, participants can feel disconnected from mainstream society. The immigrant young adults' feeling of not belonging in China and the immigrant parents' perceived marginalization in Canada are all partially caused by their language barriers. In addition, many participants regard language as more of a resource than an identity marker. For this reason, the young adults' decision of whether or not to learn Chinese, their heritage language, is made based on the necessity and functionality of its usage, instead of its role in ethnic identification.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, participants' constructions of the sense of who they are illustrate the multiple, fluid, and malleable nature of identity. Participants perform their distinct and hybrid cultural identities, which incorporate elements of the different cultures that they have lived with, without fitting specifically into any one. Such hybrid identities show resistance to the homogenization of the Chinese immigrant populations in Canada. In an increasingly globalized world where we live our lives with intense juxtaposition of differences, the establishment of hybrid identities and the "third space" (Bhabha, 1996) that allows the dominant and minority cultures to coexist in an inclusive space becomes urgent. Participants indicate the necessity of policies that not only tolerate, but recognize and welcome difference. To cultivate new forms of identity and cultural space, equally important is an open, supportive, non-directive, and non-controlling family environment constructed through the joint efforts of the immigrant parents and the young adults.

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