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*Published in:*  
Journal of Asian Pacific Communication

*DOI:*  
[10.1075/japc.21.2.04che](https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.21.2.04che)

Published: 01/01/2011

*Document Version:*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
CHEN, L. (2011). Cultural identity as a production in process: Dialectics in Hongkongers' account. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 21(2), 213-237. <https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.21.2.04che>

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## Cultural Identity as a Production in Process: Dialectics in Hongkongers' Account

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### Abstract

The type of identity most salient in intercultural communication is probably cultural identity, also a major issue in intercultural communication studies. This study adopts a dialectical perspective and approaches cultural identity as a dynamic production in and through intercultural contact and interaction. Semi-structured interviews of educated young Hongkongers turned out accounts of cultural identity along with their language use in day-to-day activities. These provided indirect access to some lived experience of people in a culturally special society. The study identifies dialectics evident in the production of cultural identity and uncovers ways people deal with dialectic tension in the process.

Keywords: cultural identity, Chinese, Hong Kong, intercultural communication

## Cultural Identity as a Production in Process: Dialectics in Hongkongers' Account

A major issue in intercultural communication studies is cultural identity, probably also the type of identity most salient in intercultural communication. Almost anything about it appears contested, no matter from what angle one looks at it. In the background, there is a general agreement that recognizes identity as one of the few fundamental human needs and part of the condition of being human<sup>1</sup> (Max-Neef et al., 1989). Whereas the importance of identity is rarely in dispute, views about identity are a different matter particularly when it comes to cultural identity (E.g., Kim, 2007). The attention may be on the modifier of culture as a social phenomenon with contentions over boundaries that define a culture as well as over the validity of a single cultural identity. The complexity increases when more than one cultural group is involved in the case of a diverse society with many ethnic groups, e.g., US, or when individuals involved are of diverse cultural background with ancestors of different origins, e.g., Eurasians, children of immigrants. Many theorize on the assumption of one or one dominant cultural identity<sup>2</sup>, usually based on a national culture. Others<sup>2</sup> argue for plurality of cultural identity (e.g., Norris, 2007; Sen, 2001), where one complementing another but also competing now and then.

Controversy also surrounds the identity part of cultural identity with respect to its ontological status, wherein we find, for example, constructionists arguing against essentialism about many points. The constructionist position holds that identity, including cultural identity, is socially constructed (with choice) and not natural or given, as the essentialism believes (e.g., Clifford, 2000). In other words, cultural identity is the choice of the party (individual or group) concerned for the benefit of this party (Sen, 1999). Further, identity including cultural identity often is plural as cultural identities from this perspective, not reducible to one, nor unproblematic but frequently contested, negotiated and ever-evolving (e.g., Eisenberg, 2001, Spivak, 1996). So much so that cultural identity is to be considered as “a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, 1990, p. 222). This view of identity resonates with that of a dialectic perspective on change. Although the two traditions of thought have different foci, different concerns and different disciplinary roots, social constructionist scholars widely utilize dialectics in

their analysis of social phenomena, including ethnic and postcolonial studies (e.g., Young, 1995) where cultural identity is a major concern at the societal level.

The present study adopts the dialectic perspective as the theoretical frame to focus on cultural identity as a dynamic phenomenon in the process of production. The cultural group under study is Hongkongers, whose personal accounts of cultural identity provide indirect access to the lived experience of people in a culturally special society. The objectives are a) to identify dialectics in the production of cultural identity and b) to reveal ways individuals deal with dialectic tension in and through communication. The analysis naturally sheds light on Hongkongers' cultural identity, which is auxiliary to the aim here yet substantively necessary for dialectics to manifest.

#### *Dialectic Approaches in Communication Studies*

In communication studies, scholars of interpersonal relationships have identified interaction dialectics associated with the necessary axes of information sharing, interdependence and variability (Baxter, 1988; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Rawlins, 1992). Relating contradictions operate with the push and pull inside the relationship as well as with the outside parties respectively between openness and closeness or revelation and non-revelation, between autonomy and connection or separation and integration, and between predictability and novelty or conventionality and uniqueness. On culture being a system of symbols, Cargile (2005) argues with the meta-theory of dialectics and presents culture as a system of human symbolic activity defined by dialectics. Contradictions are fundamental features inherent to a culture and manifest in its values, e.g., between collectivism and individualism, in its very existence between stability and change, as well as in the culture's relationship with members, who move about between cultural determinism and individual agency. About intercultural communication, Martin & Nakayama (1999) start from the nature of cultures being always in flux thanks to underlying dialectics. Along the same line, they maintain that intercultural communication takes shape and carries on amidst the dialectic opposition between the cultural and the individual, between the personal and the social, between difference and similarity, present-future and past, the static and the dynamic, and privilege and disadvantage.

Dialectic in the Hegelian sense refers to the process of change as well as its application, in which a concept or its realization passes over into and is preserved and fulfilled by its opposite (the

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2008). A dialectic perspective of intellectual inquiry embraces as the norm the assumption of change, change due to oscillation of interacting bipolar forces in the deep structure of human experience (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Mao, 1954). Opposition of dialectic forces reflects cyclical fluctuation of human needs associated with change in circumstances, out of which arise social interactions and social phenomena. Communication scholars have found dialectic a useful meta-theoretic perspective, as it helps explicate complex communication phenomena systematically and do so with a small set of conceptual postulations about contradictions in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1997; Bochner, 1984; Kim & Yun, 2007), in culture as a symbol system (Cargile, 2005) and in intercultural contacts (e.g., Chen, 2002; Chen, Drzewiecka, & Sias, 2001). Dialectics underscore the dynamic nature of communication and related social phenomena, never static and never complete.

The brief review above makes clear the particular complexity of intercultural communication, with multiple, interrelating and interactive layers. Intercultural communication deals with cultures at levels of national, ethnic, or other co-cultural (gender, disability, sexual orientation, class and age, etc.) grouping, while the level of individuals is always present where actual message exchange takes place (e.g., Belay, 1995). In this sense, intercultural communication ostensibly touches on major human life spheres of self, society and world that are part of human experience (c.f., Condon & Yousef, 1975).

#### *Dialectics and cultural identity.*

Cultural identity becomes salient in and is integral to intercultural communication with all the multiple levels, including individual, social group, ethnic and national culture. Dialectics present bear on communicators at every level and between levels, often as conflicting needs that may be wants or are really needs of various importance, whereby identity is one fundamental human need. Fulfillment of needs and wants motivates social relationships and related communication (Schutz, 1958). Yet, not all needs are compatible; some are outright opposites wherein arise dialectics. For example, the need of inclusion, or participation, underlies cultural identity and is compatible with the need of affection, but contradicts the need of freedom, or of control (independence). On one hand, the individual has the need to be included in a cultural group and cared for as a member, which requires submission or

compliance to the group norms and rules. On the other hand, there is the need of control over oneself, or autonomy, which contradicts the need to be part of a group, or connection.

Moreover, the individual may want her group to be part of a larger culture. Yet such a matter is not determined by the individual or by her group alone, as one or one's group may be rejected or excluded, thus has no control or freedom to the desired extent on this matter. This dialectic of assimilation and differentiation (Cargile, 2006) is a perennial, identity-related issue in intercultural adaptation for immigrants and host culture alike, as well as for all ethnic groups and the multicultural societies that contain them. In relation, another contradiction is present when one is part of the group and acquired a cultural identity from it. Issues may arise regarding the final say about a cultural identity, by avowal or prescription. A cultural identity is possible only when the person concerned self-identifies with, or avows membership in, a cultural group. Still, this is not sufficient, viz. the individuals concerned do not have the total control, since the avowed cultural identity may not be the same as the identity prescribed by the society, thus pitting the personal against the social (Martin & Nakayama, 1999) in a dialectic tug-of-war.

Cultural identity often has to do with the dialectic of equality and inequality (Cargile, 2006), or privilege and disadvantage (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). To be proud of one's culture may arise from the need of self-esteem or self-respect, the need to feel good about self and all things associated with self. This inevitably places one's culture in a special status, above other cultures at least in some aspects entailing inequality. This dialectic may play out in a different way when cultures are not on equal standing by some measures, e.g., political power in the world, economic development, social wealth, and cultural visibility, etc. To identify with a culture of lower standing in whatever ways must reconcile with the urge to uplift the culture's status and come to terms with the related inequality. Here is yet another way where the needs for inclusion and affection come in conflict with the needs for control and respect, as one has no control over the (perceived) standing of one's own culture and has little say in others' perceptions.

#### *Hongkongers' Cultural Identity.*

The cultural identity is always a complex matter. For Hong Kong people it has been more so due to its unique social and historical conditions, a former British colony governed largely by a

British system, for over 1.5 centuries, where Chinese culture had continued to play a major role in its social and cultural life. Running up to the final decade of the colonial years, tracking surveys from 1985 to 1995 regularly showed that over 50% of the respondents identified themselves as Hongkonger, twice more than those identified themselves as Chinese, while half as much as the latter were those identified themselves as both Hongkongers and Chinese (Lau, 1997). This so even though about 61% considered Chinese culture as the finest culture on earth, and over 40% of them were proud of the achievement of the Chinese government (Lau & Kuan, 1988).

More recently, studies have shown similar results with a majority of university student respondents (53%) and an overwhelming majority of adolescent respondents (66%) identified themselves as Hongkonger or primary Hongkonger and secondary Chinese (Hong, Chiu, Yeung, & Tong, 1999; Lam, Lau, Chiu, Hong, & Peng, 1999). Yet another project in the decade that follows the reversion of the sovereignty from 1996 to 2006, however, registered a gradually visible shift in proportions of the categories (Ma & Fung, 2007). In this set of studies, about a quarter of respondents each identified themselves as Hongkonger or Chinese respectively, some 30% self identified as Hongkonger and also Chinese, and some 10% as Chinese and also Hongkonger. Overall, Hongkonger remains the cultural identity of the majority, albeit a narrower one now, while the proportion of people with double identity has almost doubled.

The impact of sovereign turnover seems obvious and natural. Not so clear is the people's actual experience of the impact and transition, along with the related political, ideological, economical, cultural and other changes, in formulation of and accounting their cultural identity. Of particular interest is ways Hongkongers' experience of their cultural identity may be a dialectical one, as that of their friendship (Chen, 2006). Two general research questions are put forward to guide the study.

RQ1. What are the dialectics that Hongkongers may have experienced in relation to cultural identity?

RQ2. How do they manage and balance dialectics as evident in accounts of cultural identity?

## METHOD

Face to face, one-on-one, semi-structured intensive interviews provided the data. A set of interview questions were formulated to cover different aspects of cultural identity and provide a

general direction. The questions were open-ended, asking about personal experience, perceptions and feelings related to their cultural identity and other relevant areas, such as their names, use of language in various situations, observation of and interaction with various others in English and Chinese. Interviewees were encouraged to speak freely and elaborate on points of interest. All the interviews were taped recorded with consent of the interviewee.

Twenty-seven interviews in total were conducted, in 1997 and 2004. Five interviewees were female and ten were male, age ranging from 21 to 23 in the first batch of 15, and 8 females and 4 males, age 16 to 32 in the second batch of 12. All were born, grew up and were educated in Hong Kong; all were either college students or college graduates. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese and lasted for about 45 to 60 minutes each.

Following a general procedure described in Kvale (1996), responses were sorted based on the topic area and examined for themes and sub-themes across groups. Initial analysis and interpretation of data were done in relation to cultural identity. The preliminary results were examined further to address the research questions, identifying & interpreting dialectics that became evident in accounts. The next section is organized around the major themes, which help make visible dialectics in operation to follow discussion of each theme.

## ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

### *What am I - Identity Labels*

“Hongkonger” was the main label the interviewees used referring to their cultural identity, with a majority called themselves Hongkonger. Several used the label of “Chinese” and two had combinatory identification of “Hong Kong Chinese.” “British” was not among the terms used to describe himself/herself in either batch.

The interviewees self-identified as “Hongkonger” on three accounts. The first was the locale that was mentioned by all interviewees. They used this label to emphasize that they had been living, were born, grew up and educated in Hong Kong, an entity not identical to Chinese, the mainland. For example, they had this to say:

‘When I call myself “Hongkonger”, I want to separate consciously from the identity of “Chinese” ... because I have never lived in China.’ (I2)

‘I always say I am a Chinese to Western people, but I see I am not a Chinese from the perspective of identity and region.’ (II2)

The second was that they had learned who they were very early on in life. This acquired knowledge had grown into part of them emotionally and could not be replaced lightly by a similar but not identical concept. An interviewee (I8), explained it this way:

‘... My teachers never taught me the identity of “Chinese.” When they ask the question: “Where do you come from?” The model answer is “I come from Hong Kong.”...’

The psychological attachment to the label as well as the tenacity of this kind of attachment is apparent. Interviewees said that they were at home with the label of “Hongkonger” and felt strange to use simply “Chinese” to describe themselves. This is the case even for the interviewees who had used the combined identification of Hong Kong Chinese. They emphasized the importance of Hong Kong in their identity, as one explained it:

‘... The term “Hong Kong” is put before “Chinese” because I am mostly influenced by Hong Kong culture. However, Hong Kong is a region in China, therefore I am a Chinese.’ (I9)

‘I am not unwilling to think of myself as a Chinese, but I am used to thinking about myself as a Hong Kong person ... For me, Chinese refers to mainland Chinese people.’ (II4)

Hong Kong had been under the British colonial rule for nearly 150 years, but the interviewees did not consider themselves assimilated to the cultural identity of ‘British’. The reasons offered included that they were of a different race than the British, of completely different cultures, and that they themselves were not influenced by the British culture.

‘I am greatly influenced by Hong Kong culture. Although I have a British passport, and Hong Kong had been ruled by Britain for a long period of time, I don’t consider British as my cultural identity.’ (I9)

‘I call myself Hong Kong Chinese not because it is my cultural identity, but I think that I am a Chinese in blood.’ (I3)

‘When I think of Chinese people, I feel very different from them and we do not understand each other. However, we have relation in blood, which make me feel ambivalent.’ (I7)

The consideration of blood, or biological connection, demonstrated above was the third account. It was frequently mentioned as an important aspect of cultural identity, although the interviewees had also made contradicting remarks. This concern in itself may be indicative of the traditional Chinese cultural mindset that places great importance on blood relations, the very foundation of family (Hsu, 1981) closely tied to a land, a place.

Cultural identity for these interviewees has to do with one’s physical association with a place as well as biological connection, such that it is seen to naturally derive from blood relation and associated physical presence. This way, the subjective experience of cultural identity is given an objective justification. A similar reasoning can be seen in accounts of “difference” between the British and the Chinese on the one hand, and between the Cantonese and other Chinese on the other. Far from being specific and categorical, interviewees, nevertheless, reported perceptual, or phenomenological, differences they directly or indirectly experienced as common-sense observations available for anyone to see. These differences, it then follows, naturally contribute to distinction in cultures. Self-perception is offered as one more proof of distinctive cultural identity in this three-way comparison. In spite of historical facts of the British influence on the political, legal and social life in Hong Kong, interviewees did not feel themselves influenced by the British culture. This feeling is what counts in their avowed cultural identity. They definitely did not feel themselves part of British culture and did not find it in themselves. They were also ambivalent about a Chinese identity. To them the label “Chinese” represented the rest of China but hardly Hong Kong, which, at present, they were not yet a part emotionally. They did recognize the cultural tradition, as well as the perceived biological bond. Tradition and biology connect people in Hong Kong and China as a collective. What is missing is a feeling, a connection, attachment or bonding at the personal level.

*Dialectical tension.* In relation to research questions, we can identify at least three dialectics so far: personal-social, assimilation-differentiation, and similarity-difference. The tension is apparent between the personal and the social, manifest for most interviewees in personal attachment to being

Hongkonger and national<sup>3</sup> designation (socio-political beyond the local) of them being Chinese.

Interviewees appear to have managed this by acknowledgment and acceptance of the latter as a fact of political life and a social expectation from the world as well as non-local Chinese, while preserving the former as a fact in another domain at another level. Assimilation-differentiation and similarity-difference dialectics reflect two more aspects of a same phenomenon, that Hong Kong being a part of China, in contrast to Britain, and culturally part Chinese and part British.

Their views are related in terms of physical location, blood relation (biological), or/and overall cultural heritage, each of which seems to give them certain leverage in the dialectical juggling. The blood relation differentiates Hongkongers from the British and keeps them from being assimilated into the Chinese; physical location differentiates them from both the British and the Chinese, as does the culture in the perceptual sense as well as the emotional attachment. On the other hand, they balance the tension between similarity and difference with respect to cultural affinity in another way. They are the same as the Chinese generally in biology and traditional culture, and different from the latter in concurrent culture perceived to have little mutual understanding. In spite of some explicit denials of the British influence, the very recognition of Hongkongers being different from the Chinese is indicative of the influence of the British rule.

#### *What is in a Name – Identity Markers*

The name of a person is an important symbol of one's identity. Adding the factor of language, i.e. use of English and Chinese name including English and Chinese signature in Hong Kong, it provides another angle to the picture of Hong Kong people's cultural identity, one that is marked with language. Interviewees' accounts of their experience were solicited around their English name, getting the English name, and using the English and the Chinese name.

An overwhelming majority of interviewees were using an English name<sup>4</sup> at the time of interview. The few who stopped using their English name because they thought that the English name was not as meaningful as the Chinese one. They were not willing to get another one unless they were forced to do so. In contrast to the Chinese name that seemed to be the default, most interviewees had changed their English name for two to three times, while a few had changed it so many times that they could not remember the exact number. Typically the English name was a choice of convenience out of

necessity.

‘I had a pen-friend at primary school, so I got the (English) name, to make things easier. Then I realized I didn’t like this name, plus I was going to university, so I got another one. ... No, I do not take it seriously. It was only out of necessity, for one must have an English name for the university.’ (I4)

Recalling their experiences of getting English names, most interviewees pointed out the notable role a teacher played in this matter. They got an English name because either their school teacher asked them to do so or their English teachers were foreigners that did not know Chinese. Regarding reasons for not having a stable English name, several said that when they felt a name became dull and outdated, they would immediately get another one. Clearly, this name was like a replaceable accessory; there was little sentiment attached to it.

‘When I was in primary school, my English teacher requested every student to get an English name. I had changed my English name many times. I changed it when I learnt a new one. In secondary school, my English teachers also asked the students to get an English name. I talked to my aunt, and she suggested one that sounded similar to my previous one, so I used it. However, when I was in Form VI, I did not want to use an English name that was suggested by other people, so I decided on one by myself, as a way of self assertion.’ (I9)

‘When I was in middle school, I was asked to use English name in class, so I picked one from the dictionary. It looked good, sounded well, so I chose this one.’ (III1)

Comparing the use of Chinese or English name produced revealing results. The interviewees attributed differences to social convention or local cultures. Those interviewees who used English name in university did so because they discovered that an English name was part of the subculture there. Every classmate used it to introduce himself/herself, so they just followed suit. They reported using English name although many habitually used Chinese name in the middle school. English name appeared to be a badge of passage of sorts. A few interviewees even mentioned that they felt strange when using their Chinese names in the university. Use of Chinese name in secondary schools was also because of the subculture, which had no tradition in using English name for daily communication with

others even though everyone had an English name.

Further inquiry revealed a difference in the perceived social distance associated with the name. English name was associated with larger social distance and smaller status differentiation. Several interviewees mentioned using the English name with casual friends that were not very close whereas using Chinese name with close friends. Interestingly, many reported that English name was suitable for informal situation, e.g., social gathering while the Chinese name was more suitable for formal situations, e.g., communicating with senior people or boss at work. Most interviewees felt that their Chinese name generated more affectionate feelings than did their English name. On the other hand, an English name conveyed a sense of being casual and sociable, whereas the Chinese one was more respectful and polite.

‘When my friends call me by my Chinese name, I feel warm and close.’ (II2)

‘It is not necessary to use the English name when you talk to your relatives, because they speak Cantonese and could not understand English. But for friends, it is more common to let them know your English name. There is no need for them to know you more. Chinese name is more private for me. I won’t let strangers know my Chinese name.’ (II7)

‘I usually like to use my Chinese name, but when I started working, I prefer to use my English name at work. ... Actually I don’t like my English name very much because of the way it sounds.’ (II11)

Similar sentiments were reflected in providing a signature in English or Chinese. The majority (16 interviewees) used both Chinese and English signature, eight signed in English only and two had Chinese signature only.

Regarding situations for English and Chinese signature, some mentioned using the English signature in informal and/or unimportant documents, such as bank account book, informal conference record, credit card and application form. Similarly, some mentioned using Chinese signature in formal or important documents, e.g. credit card, contract and formal letter. Although document like credit card existed in both situations, the result was inconsistent, depending on personal perceptions of what counted as being important or formal. A major reason is pragmatic, e.g., what the situations call for,

difficult to be forged. A major concern was conveyance of the importance and formality of matter in use of signature. For some interviewees, Chinese signature was taken more seriously and respectfully than English. It was closer to them as a person. To them, using English signature carried little responsibility and commitment to the document, while Chinese signature represents them better, especially when the document carries legislative responsibility.

‘I use Chinese signature only. ... I think that my Chinese name represents me better, and is more serious in the eyes of law.’ (I7)

‘I have both Chinese and English signature. I usually use the Chinese signature in writing personal letter, because Chinese is humanistic and affectionate in my view.’ (I9)

‘When I write Christmas card to my friends, if they are elder than me, then I always write in Chinese.’ (II2)

Eight interviewees used English signature only. The reasons for not having a Chinese signature varied: following the family tradition, yet unable to give a beautiful signature in Chinese, English signature being quicker and convenient to sign, and no need to do it in Chinese. Two explained their case this way.

‘I actually would like to use Chinese signature, but can’t figure out a way to sign it beautifully, and I do a better job with the English one. So I used that. If I could do a good Chinese signature, I would definitely use it, because it represents me better.’ (I4)

‘I cannot decide which should be used yet... For now, I sign my credit card in English. Doing it in Chinese seems childish, immature, ... in English feels a bit high class.’ (II9)

In summary, signature was not simply a signature. Various considerations had gone into actually using a particular one, although not all directly related to the matter of identity. The situation distinction was based on “importance” and “formality” to be endorsed by a signature where a particular one was called for. Importance and formality of situation is related to concerns over a

proper presentation of self, hence indirectly to social, and sometimes cultural, identity of self.

Accounts on name and signature presented a view on the relationship between the name/signature and the name/signature bearer as mostly a utilitarian one. The sense of cultural identity in associated with name/signature emerged only occasionally when a Chinese one was involved. The Chinese name was given first (often at birth or shortly after), taken for granted as the given one and the one considered emotionally part of the self. English name or names came much later, mostly involuntarily acquired, short-lived, and used as a disposable label for the sole purpose of identification. Yet, being dispensable describes only particular English names and not the category of English name, which is necessary even valuable at times, and certainly functional.

The consideration of time, or history of association, implied in accounts, again emerges as an important aspect of identity, also presumed in the consideration of biological, traditional and geographical association discussed earlier. Identity takes shape on the basis of a history of sharing. The Chinese name is given much earlier in life and integrated into the self more closely. There is also the sharing of genetic make-up, of tradition, of location, and of being part of each other, the name and the person. All combined to give them the “Hong Kong” identity, whereas the “Chinese” part of their identity arises only from partial associations.

*Dialectics manifest.* The dialectic of instrumentality-affection<sup>5</sup> is apparently operating in the naming aspect of identity, of which language is a marker. Emotional attachment is not the sole determining consideration when it comes to one's name, although it is the core of an identity. Functional necessity may prevail in the form of convenience, easiness of use, or authenticity as circumstance has it. The society context in Hong Kong has brought the instrumental consideration in the naming to the forefront. People choose to use a name and signature perceived to better fit the situation and not just go by their emotional attachment to it. Also relevant is the personal-social dialectic, seen in the push and pull between personal wish, individual preference and social conformity to the convention in the secondary school or university. Interestingly, the personal wish and preference is formed and shaped to a large extent by social convention and conformity of an earlier time in life, which grows into one's sense of self and identity over time and turns from the social into the personal.

A balance is maintained with pragmatic detachment in use of their names, particularly at times when the instrumental and the social take precedence over the affection and the personal. The English name/signature is regarded as a thing to do in order to get on with the day-to-day business; it does not represent or affect one's sense of self and identity. It is reasoned that a name in English does not really represent one's identity. The upshot is that one really does not need to have one's cultural identity proclaimed at every moment. All this indicates the dialectical and dynamic nature of identity production: a same element may be weighted variously in various contexts; one pole may prevail over the other some but not all of the time.

*Languages – the First and a Second*

Language attitude is an indicator of one's attitude toward the associated culture and point to identification with a relevant culture (Giles & Johnson, 1981). Interviews tapped language attitudes through perceived importance of a language by interviewees and reasoning of their language learning.

Attitude toward Cantonese/Chinese and English came through in reaction to two common scenes in Hong Kong. Regarding two Chinese conversing in English in public places, something all interviewees reportedly had encountered in their daily life, most thought it forgivable if the speakers were foreign-born-Chinese or educated in a foreign country. However, many also said that if these two Chinese were English and Chinese bilingual but still chose to use English, they would feel unhappy, disappointed, troubled, or strange, since there was no reason for them to speak English in this case. Moreover, a few interviewees reported feeling indignant when they knew that these speakers were Chinese who happened to know only English, which was then considered a shameful conduct. Some interviewees also reported feeling suspicious about the motives for those Chinese that used English in a public place. It was speculated that these people might want to appear superior, pretend to have high education level, want to gain attention from others, or just show off. One comments summed up a complex general attitude for this matter.

'If they are fluent, I would assume that they are returning Chinese from overseas. If they are not fluent, then they may be just practicing English. I'm not against Chinese-looking persons talking in English. On the contrary I sometimes envy them for their ability to communicate in English. Fluent

English tend to give the impression of superiority in social interaction. If, however, they can only speak English and not Chinese, their mother tongue, I think it is really shameful.’ (I15)

The case of reading English publications in public place, the other scene, fared differently. Although a few interviewees also felt that the Chinese reader might want to be superior, or pretend to have high education level, or attempt to show off by reading English publication, the majority reported having neutral feelings about reading English books, for it was too common and many school assignments included readings in English. Another few interviewees reported having positive feelings toward and admired this Chinese because of his/her high English standard. For the interviewees, English language was a tool for access to higher education, landing better jobs, or needed in business.

The differentiation between oral and written form of the language seems to present a mark in cultural identity associated with language attitude. Reading is considered a task, which one often has to accomplish as part of many necessary daily activities without emotional implication. In contrast, the oral form of languages touches something deeper that is closely associated with being a person. It is a property, a characteristic, qualifying a person to be member of a particular culture. A cultural member in turn is identified as such by the language he or she speaks. Social expectation then is for one to acknowledge and display one’s cultural identity with the native tongue, demonstrating the personal-social dialectic in this matter.

With respect to motives of learning Chinese language, the results were similar. The needs of learning Chinese were intrinsic and taken for granted. Most interviewees felt it mandatory, a moral obligation, to have an accepted Chinese standard simply because they were Chinese and because they lived in a Chinese society.

‘If I must talk about the motive, I think that I am a Chinese and hence I should learn Chinese language well.’ (I3)

Some interviewees had interest in learning Chinese because they favored Chinese culture:

‘... I like to learn Chinese because I am interested in Chinese culture, e.g., literature. I want to have good Chinese standard so that I can fully enjoy the literature and even better if I can create literature myself.’ (I11)

With respect to English, they reported academic reasons as a motive to learn, for English was a basic subject in examinations; they must have good grasp to pass and to continue study. Moreover, having good English standard was necessary for other subjects because most subjects were taught in English. Interviewees also mentioned English proficiency as a prerequisite for well-paid jobs, an asset for a good living.

The majority of interviewees, about equal in number, chose either Cantonese or English as their most important language. A few identified Mandarin as most important. Interviewees said that Cantonese was important as the indigenous language and represented Hong Kong culture. This is expressed explicitly in the following remarks:

‘... Cantonese is important because it is a local language that I use for daily communication ... Cantonese can represent my culture, and Hong Kong culture is my culture.’ (I3)

‘... Cantonese ... It is part of our life’ (I7)

‘...Cantonese is important. It is my most frequently used language. It can best express my inner feelings.’ (I2)

‘I like Cantonese the most, it is the language that I am most familiar with and have to speak in daily life.’ (II3)

‘Cantonese is my favorite language, it is my mother tongue and I don’t need to learn (as a language subject).’ (II12)

The importance of English and Mandarin Chinese represented other considerations.

‘Of course it is English (that is most important). Good English is the most important for a job and career prospect.’ (I4)

‘English. ... For job application, no one will be tested for Cantonese or Chinese ability. However, one will be tested for English.’ (I5)

‘... English, because English is a kind of international language and official language of many western countries. What is more, many large business companies are operated by foreigners. People who are fluent in English will have a great advantage in getting the job.’ (II6)

‘If you are good at spoken English, it is more easily for you to get a high job position and perform better. If your English is very poor, then you may be laughed at by others.’ (II9)

‘... Chinese. Because I am a Chinese, and Chinese is the legitimate first language of China. If Chinese is not most important what is?’ (I6)

‘Chinese is the national language. One must know it.’ (II)

‘I think Mandarin is the most important language. Nowadays more and more Hong Kong people go to mainland China for work.’ (II12)

Interviewees who chose English as their most important language gave extrinsic reasons to explanations to their choice: for finding a good job, for further study, for living in a globalized world. Although quite a number of interviewees chose English as their most important subject, it was not named a language that represented Hong Kong cultural identity as was Cantonese.

*Dialectics at work.* The attitude toward languages confirms that associated with names in different languages and reflects the same dialectics of instrumentality-affection and personal-social. It is shown in the choice of Chinese versus English on one hand, and written versus oral forms of languages on the other. To the interviewees Chinese lies on the affection pole as opposed to English at the instrumental end that may be socially required. Cantonese is more affectionate and personally preferred, and *Putonghua* more instrumental. The tension is dealt with similarly with the three-way balancing act, i.e., no single pole prevails while no language is favored at all times, all following the lead of oscillating identity needs under the circumstance.

Other dialectics also emerge in the process. Cantonese locates closest to heart as part of cultural identity; Chinese language also represents identity, but more on an abstract level and from association, whereas English is essential mostly as a means for some pragmatic goals. In contrast to Cantonese, Chinese is the different and stands for differentiation culturally, which, however, becomes the similar and turns into assimilation relative to English.

#### *A Language and Its Speaker*

Identification with a culture may also manifest in perceptions about a language (and variation) and its speakers. Whereas interviewees counted Cantonese as the most important language to them

because it represented Hong Kong culture, their opinions and feelings about Hong Kong people and perceptions of Cantonese were not consistent.

With regard to Cantonese people, all interviewees gave generally positive evaluations: many reported positive feelings about Hong Kong people, feeling affectionate toward them and proud of being Hongkongers. They shared the view that Hong Kong people were hardworking and effective user of resources, with high adaptability and a never-give-up mentality. They thought that Cantonese was local, affectionate, vivid and humanistic for expression of their emotion, and the mother tongue of Hong Kong culture. However, quite a number of interviewees also noted its negative aspects. They thought that Cantonese language was not artistic, not melodious, not cultured, and noisy; it was a better tool for communication than one to be enjoyed for artistic property. Some were ambivalent with less favorable evaluations of Hongkongers who were materialistic, self-interested and lacking in ideal.

‘I think my Mom is a true Hongkonger. She is hardworking, persevering, and does not give up easily. But Hongkongers have some shortcomings too. For example, they just don’t want to fall behind. Because they do not give up easily, they tend to be self-protective.’ (11)

With respect to mainland Chinese, most interviewees related negative perceptions of them, e.g. being noisy, rude, overly concerned with self-interest, not cultured, conservative, inflexible, like cheating, as well as big problems in the Chinese government. Several interviewees said they had no special feelings about Chinese because they were so unfamiliar just like foreigners. Interviewees thought that they were different from Hongkongers in many aspects, e.g. ways of thinking and attitudes, therefore the two groups did not understand each other.

‘It is difficult for me to choose a word to express this kind of feeling. ... The word “mainland Chinese” makes me to think of people with low quality. (16)

However, a few interviewees were proud of being a Chinese or expressed understanding.

‘I have relatives in China. They live in a poor village and their education level is not high. They think that Hong Kong is a very good place. But I think that Hong Kong is not a place that is the same with their expectations.’ (13)

‘In contrast to mainlander or “*Putonghua*”, the word “Chinese” is much better and

more positive. I always relate this word to hard-working people.’ (II6)

‘... Because different people live in different society and cultural background, it is natural for Chinese to behave like that, such as not aggressive, not pay attention to hygiene, because their circumstance is just like that. If one could not be satisfied the basic need of life, then it is difficult for him to pay attention to other things. So it is not necessary to talk a lot, just to penalize the bad behavior. If they could not have enough food to eat, how do we talk with them about the issue of public environment?’ (II7)

Although most interviewees seemed to have negative perceptions of mainland Chinese, they were quite positive on Chinese language, which was also the written form of Cantonese. Some interviewees favored it because it was artistic. Some felt grateful because they had an opportunity to learn Chinese, because it was a special kind of language and represented a special culture. Some commented on the difficulty of learning Chinese. The contrast between perceptions of Chinese people and language is illustrated in the accounts below:

‘Chinese characters feel close. ... If we have to choose between writing in English and Chinese, most people I think, including me, will choose Chinese.

We feel close to it. ... Many mainland Chinese tend to cheat. Some are simply hoodlum, with no public morality.’ (I13)

Identification with Chinese the language stood in contrast to lack of it with Chinese the people, those that lived in the mainland. The clear sense of differentiation was readily expressed and shared, countering the natural affinity toward Chinese the language.

Interviewees’ perceptions on foreigner were more neutral and positive than on (mainland) Chinese, further highlighting the perceived difference with an evaluative eye. Some interviewees expressed better feelings about foreigners than about mainland Chinese because the former were nicer and more rational, and their societies had better development than China. Some interviewees expressed that foreigners were superior because their language was an international language, and they had high international status in terms of advance technology, good economic and political system. There were, however, also reactionary responses to this general perception, as illustrated in the following remarks.

‘... I realized some people actually thought the British is superior and felt intimidated. This ticked me off. ... I thought we were all human beings why was it that English speaking foreigners were more “high”’ (I1)

‘Western people..... The western countries are much advanced. People live a high quality life and concern more about the way of life.’ (I13)

‘I think English is an elegant language. It is more beautiful than other language both in spoken language and written words. ... But in English speaking countries, people tend to look down on others of different countries, such as Chinese.’ (I19)

Generally, interviewees’ perceptions on English were consistent to their perceptions of foreigner. Some had no special feelings on English, for they still felt this language “distanced.” Some interviewees thought that English represented power and superiority because it was an international language. They considered English as a skill that was convenient to have and easy to learn, but not as artistic as Chinese language.

Accounts of their evaluation of languages were matter-of-fact and had little to do with cultural identity, as languages were apparently judged for its inherent qualities (e.g. ease for learning) and pragmatic values. When the talk turned into evaluations based on personal connections and feelings, however, interviewees’ emotional attachment to Cantonese language and Hong Kong/Chinese culture was in display along with the underlying cultural identification. Similarly, comments on Hong Kong people, Chinese people and English-speaking foreigners were rather matter-of-fact early on, until it turned personal. Perceptions of speakers of a language were generally related to the societal wealth and technological advancement. Admiration and respect went to the Western others who were considered modern and advanced. “Mother” and “relatives” were brought out as examples for people in Hong Kong and in mainland, whereas foreigner examples were persons of no personal relations. It metaphorically symbolized the position of each in the cultural identity of Hong Kong interviewees.

*Dialectical juxtaposition.* Seen from the above, underlying views about Cantonese and Hongkongers is an ideal model against which one's own people are measured from a realistic standpoint, in spite of the emotional bond. The instrumentality-affection dialectic is juxtaposed with

that of ideal-reality and similarity-difference in relation to the Hongkongers' cultural identity. Society development with associated social wealth and technical advancement belongs to the ideal to be inspired to, which is not quite Hong Kong, and definitely not mainland China in their view. The ideal is useful and desirable, but not in one's heart and not the same as Hong Kong. The affection goes to the real, Hong Kong, although it falls short of the ideal.

There are also attempts to do justice to the "other" Chinese, by situating the target group in their social context, evidence of the equality and inequality dialectic. The Hongkongers' merits and achievements that is their pride naturally contrast to the less than flattering perceptions of their mainland relatives as not being equal. Expression of understanding of their difference in circumstances allows interviewees to pass judgment in a fair and unbiased manner, tipping toward equality. This dialectic juxtaposition is also shown in accounting perceptions of the British or Westerners, who hold the comparative advantage, but not the emotional one, where the equality is brought to Hongkongers for their less than ideal circumstances.

#### *Communication with Mainland Chinese and Foreigners*

Communication experience with mainland Chinese and foreigners from traveling, academic exchange, or visiting students/faculty, with limited rather than more intimate, personal contact, was also telling about interviewees' cultural identity and identification. Interviewees had pleasant and unpleasant impressions about mainland Chinese, mostly centered on discrepancy in mutual expectations and lack of mutual understanding. There was a common sentiment that it is sad, or even embarrassing, that they could not speak *Putonghua* and were forced to speak English with the mainland Chinese. With respect to exploration of cultural differences, interviewees found a great deal of differences between Hong Kong people and mainland Chinese in the interactions.

They noted difference in vocabularies and in thinking styles, with attention attracted to the negative side of Chinese and positive side of Hong Kong people. For example, they said that Chinese thinking style was conservative and their own was flexible. Most interviewees reported heightened awareness about their Hongkonger identity in communication with mainland Chinese. Such feelings occurred in other situations of strong contrast or when their "Hongkong-ness" was unrecognized. Some of them thought that Hong Kong and China were quite different in terms of culture. As a result,

the more the mainland Chinese assumed that they were the same, the more the interviewees felt they were different. On the other hand, some of them found that Chinese were very patriotic and had strong national identity, which became a big contrast to their Hongkong cultural identity. They thought that their sense of cultural identity was very weak and they did not have a nationality as a back up for them to communicate with people in other countries.

‘When I communicated with the Chinese students, they expected that they had no difference with the Hong Kong people. However, I thought that we were different. Sometimes I did not understand what they were talking about even I could listen to their *Putonghua*.’ (I7)

Strong perceptions of differences also aroused high awareness of cultural distinctiveness.

‘I strongly feel about the cultural difference between Hong Kong and China when I visited a university in the tour. I remembered that the entrance of this university had some Chinese texts that encourage students to do their best and be practical. All of us felt surprised about this and thought that if this entrance belongs to an university in Hong Kong, the texts would be read as encouraging students to be lazy and not serious on study!’ (I9)

‘When I say I am a Hong Kong people, I would like others to regard me as a clever person with wisdom and knowledge. That is not to say Chinese is not clever, but to emphasize most Hong Kong people is more cultured. I want to tell others I am a Hongkonger, a cultured person.’ (II9)

There were also shocks of a different nature that underscored the Chinese part of their cultural identity, for the common ethnic root or blood relation was not questioned, and foregrounded the difference they felt they had with mainland Chinese.

‘I think that if I learn German and use it to communicate with the native speakers, the cultural shock will not be as great as the cultural shock coming from the communication with Chinese ... the mainland Chinese and I are both Chinese, but we don’t have a common language. This brings me a great shock.’ (I3)

Perceptions of communicating with the foreigners were quite positive in general. Most interviewees felt comfortable and happy to communicate with them because they were nice, helpful, polite, humorous, and had direct expression in communication. On the other hand, some interviewees did not like to communicate with foreigners because they were too casual and open. Similarly, interviewees mentioned the language difference with foreigners. They thought that although both could speak English, their ways of speaking English were different and represented different cultures. Moreover, interviewees pointed out specific differences in their communication style: foreigners were direct in expression but they were indirect.

Awareness of cultural identity was slightly different in the case of communicating with foreigners. Most reported increased awareness of their cultural identity because Hong Kong and western countries represented different cultures. Several mentioned experience of heightened sense of cultural identity due to mistaken identification.

‘I remembered that when I visited a zoo in Peking in the study tour, there were some foreigners in there. They said “Hello” to us and asked if we were Japanese. All of us reacted very strongly to their question and said “we are Chinese.” I was surprised that why they thought that we were Japanese, because I have a Chinese face. I think that next time, when people ask me my identity, I will answer: “I am Chinese, but come from Hong Kong.”’ (I3)

Being Chinese was secondary to being Hongkongese. It nevertheless was part of one’s identity and demanded recognition. Denial of one’s cultural identity, even though inadvertently, aroused strong feelings. The incident revealed a psychological distance between being Chinese and being Hongkonger, whether it came from other Chinese or foreigner others. Difference noted in ways and manners further explained or rationalized the distance in two cultural identities.

*Dialectic balance.* A dialectical process of the social vs. the personal transpires when personal experience is confronted with social norms that tie a people together on basis of cultural heritage. Whereas the social instills expectation of similarity of Chinese whether in Hong Kong or in mainland, the personal provides first hand experience of the difference to be included as an aspect of Hong Kong cultural identity. The difference felt is then balanced by the sense of identification when they are

misidentified as members of another culture. Cultural identity in this process is fluid, emergent and negotiated to a considerable extent and often in response to the circumstance. It is ever positioning at a point between dialectical ends in host of dialectics.

Similarity-difference and assimilation-differentiation dialectics also play out in perceptions and expectations of Hongkongers vis-à-vis others, as accounts of differences as boundaries of a cultural identity are countered with acknowledgment of similarities here and there. The constant common claim of difference with the mainland Chinese contradicts inadvertent surprises given off in actual experience of some difference, which stand to testify expectations of similarity with fellow Chinese culture members from the mainland. Identification moves toward differentiation as Hongkongers while they resist the prescribed assimilation perceived to come from other Chinese. Perceptions and attitude thus may separate a language and its speakers in a way that each associates with one pole of the dialectic: assimilation expectations are paired with differentiation in emotional connection, all being integral part of the dynamic experience of cultural identity.

### *Conclusion*

Hong Kong interviewees' shared their views, experience and feelings in use of English and Chinese names, of the two languages in written and spoken forms, as well as perceptions of and relations with mainland Chinese and Western non Chinese in social interactions. The interviewees were young and educated, probably more candid, articulate and reflective than the general population. This may amplify or render a shared experience visible that is otherwise mundane and hidden from plain view, yet is no less valid or illustrative.

Their accounts provide glimpse of dialectics at work: personal-social, assimilation-differentiation, similarity-difference, instrumentality-affection, ideal-reality, and equality-inequality, all embedded in the experience of their own cultural identity. The tension is managed with taking position in a variety of ways. Positioning may be toward alternate poles for different purposes, or at opposite poles at different levels at the same time, or at different poles that cut across ostensibly separate substantive areas. Accounts of experience show cultural identity to be a production ever in process at the levels of both individuals and the society as a whole. Individual perceptions, assessments and feelings about one's cultural identity are aligned, adjusted and reconciled across time

along with the circumstances, and interact with that of others as perceived for further alignment, adjustment and reconciliation. The process produces cultural identities that are real and vibrant with varied importance and alternate salience in different contexts, presenting the ultimate Hongkonger that has been and continues to be living and becoming.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>According to Manfred Max-Neef and associates, Fundamental human needs stem from the condition of being human and are few, finite and classifiable. These needs include subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, recreation, creation and freedom, which are distinct from the conventional notion of economic wants that are infinite and insatiable.

<sup>2</sup>The assumption is prevalent in writings on pragmatic social policies, politics and government (e.g., Kymlicka, 1995; Rorty, 1989) and, to a lesser extent, in social scientific studies, where the assumption is often associated with the methodology thus relevant only to the study concerned.

<sup>3</sup>Ladegaard's (2007) study indicates perceptions of national culture as a primary frame cultural reference.

<sup>4</sup>In fact, the English name in Hong Kong refers to any name that is not Chinese but used along side the Chinese one. A considerable proportion of English names are from other cultures, including Japanese, Spanish, Indonesia, etc. all considered and referred to as the "English" name.

<sup>5</sup>This is one of interaction dialectic in friendship proposed by Rawlins (1992).

<sup>6</sup>That the production of a Chinese identity in association with a modern nation is yet to be a reality as contended by He & Guo (2000) is perhaps also evident in Hong Kong, albeit in a different way.

#### Author note

This paper is revised from a presentation at the Identity and Intercultural Communication Conference, Shanghai Normal University, China, Dec. 2008. Part of the data was drawn from Chen & Fan (1999).

The author also wishes to thank Yan Leung for assistance in data collection and Juan Du for assistance

in data processing.

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