Review essay

The resilient Chinese in Australia: Ethnicity, identity and 'Chineseness'

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Abstract

This review essay discusses the multigenerational ethnicity of Chinese people in Australia, particularly those who are long settled and Australian-born. The recent book by Ngan and Chan, *The Chinese Face in Australia: Multi-generational Ethnicity among Australian-born Chinese* provides an exploration of those Australian-born Chinese (ABCs) who having been long settled in Australia, still retain their own unique Chinese ethnicity. In comparison, the article by Tung and Chung explores the way in which a diaspora can contribute to the economic operations of both the country of origin and the diasporic host country, and further explores the changes in the views of the Chinese in Australia with the changes they experienced over the course of Australian history. This essay begins with an historical account of Chinese settlement in Australia, identifying the ways in which 'Chineseness' is perceived and performed in the social context, within the home, within the ethnic community and comparatively within the global Chinese diaspora. The review further delves into discrimination of the basis of ethnicity and considers the ways in which Chinese have coped with racism, utilizing ethnic and cultural coping, building their resilience to continue forward. Finally, the review probes the life course theory to determine its relevance to long settled ABCs and their ethnicity as well as the impact of linkages on this ethnicity and attempts to answer the question: Is hybridism, the process that sees members of a diaspora forming hybrid identities within the host society, a way out?

Keywords

Australian-born Chinese, Chinese diaspora, Chineseness, ethnicity, hybridity

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Introduction

In the last 10 years, the importance of China to Australia has increased along with the country's economic, strategic and political weight. China has experienced a significant expansion in its economy, even though there was a slight slowdown in 2011, with its Gross Domestic Product growing at the impressive rate of 10% in the last 20 years (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2013). In the 2011 Australian Census, about 4% of Australia's population (approximately 865,000 people) identified as having Chinese ancestry (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). In spite of difficulties with cultural transition, language barriers and racial discrimination, Chinese Australians have evolved from being mainly indentured labourers in the 19th century to one of the most well-established, highly educated communities in the country today. Their presence provided the impetus to White Australia policy from 1901 onwards; today Australian policy wishes to take advantage of everything that it can get by being in the vicinity of Asia, which in the language of business and politics is 'China first'. But as far as ordinary people are concerned, we find many people who would like to disguise or even attempt to suppress their ethnic background in public, even though every day small racial encounters remind them that they are different from mainstream Anglo-Saxon Australia. The difficulty for the ethnic populations is that of concealing their ethnicity, be it at school as a child or as an adult in various work settings, or to successfully blend in with the mainstream and find a sense of belonging and acceptance. Moran (2011: 2154) has the following to say in the context of multiculturalism:

> For a national identity to support multiculturalism it must be conceived as predominantly post-ethnic, and as dynamic and changing, involving an open and ongoing dialogue about national traditions. However, even multicultural nations require some degree of (mainly civic) common national culture, supporting a sense of 'we-ness', that provides the context through which co-nationals can debate – and are willing to debate together – the complexities of identity, diversity, and contested national traditions.

Many people in ethnic communities are conscious of living a two legged existence (Ngan and Chan, p. 16), often challenging the assimilationist assumption that weakening ethnicity is a progressive assimilationist path to complete integration – which is to what Moran (2011: 2154) may be referring to provide support for 'we-ness'.

The Chinese in Australia: A brief history

The concept of diasporas refers to small portions of a larger cultural group dispersed among other host countries but who maintain, reframe, or reinvent the connection to their homeland in various ways (Ngan and Chan, p. 1). For the Chinese, there has been

spread of diasporic communities all over the world with the movement of people out of China since the 1820s. Chinese settlement in Australia is almost as old as white settlement and the Chinese diaspora has undergone a number of changes in terms of position and role within Australian society over the years. Also victim to extensive institutional racism, the Chinese diaspora has demonstrated great tenacity in retaining and adapting their ethnicity to survive and flourish in the host culture (hence the title of this review, 'The resilient Chinese'). Their ethnicity can be seen as a means of coping with racism and discrimination leading to their resilience, but this racism may also be linked to the ethnic coping utilized by the Chinese.

After convict transportations to Australia started to dwindle in the 1840s, large numbers of Chinese were indentured as labourers (Inglis, 1972), forming what was to become a significant relationship between an isolated British colony and the Chinese Empire (Williams, 1999). The Chinese settlement began in the 1850s with the onset of the gold rush (McGowan, 2012: 26). Those first Chinese migrants are now classified as 'sojourners' rather than 'settlers' due to their tendency to return to China (Inglis, 1972: 267; Ngan and Chan, p. 3). The Chinese migrants of the time were predominantly men and there is some thought that there may have been cases of kidnapping by labour traders (Williams, 1999). Given their tendency to return and the lack of support of family to encourage settling, the Chinese men of that time had little incentive to integrate into the host culture apart from what was required for survival (Inglis, 1972: 268); indeed, their very presence was resisted by white settlers (Williams, 1999). The later influx of Chinese migrants in Australia came following the Japanese conflict in the 1930s (Williams, 1999). Despite the resistance and racism aimed at the Chinese in the gold fields, most writers give an impression of these men as having a respected work ethic and, in some cases, they were thought to be too hard working, which resulted in the white workers being viewed as less reliable.

This certainly would not have endeared them to their white counterparts. Resistance to this cheap labour occurred as soon as it arrived and was heavily mixed with racism. Racism drove them to live in their own camps. Their work practices, physical appearance and fear of the unknown led to racial persecution and violent clashes, including those in Lambing Flat (now Young) in New South Wales. Some Chinese men did eventually settle, however, and these men eventually brought their families and began the history of Australian-born Chinese (ABCs) (Inglis, 1972: 267). There was also some intermarriage, particularly among Chinese men who married European women who had fallen on hard times (McGowan, 2012: 27) and this added to the number of ABCs. The mining boom ended eventually and those Chinese who remained turned to market gardening for economic survival. This became the predominant occupation up until federation in 1901, which coincided with the beginning of the White Australia policy. The policy had an enormous impact on the number of Chinese entering Australia. This policy led to decreases in the number of Chinese migrating to Australia while the number of women and children ABCs was increasing (Inglis, 1972: 268; Williams, 1999).

With the end of the White Australia policy came many changes for the Chinese in Australia. They also moved into the roles of merchants and shopkeepers and were more likely to be employers and self-employed than to be the labourers they had once been. Family reunions became possible (Williams, 1999) and, as a result, the number of

Chinese-born migrants began to increase, adding to the generations of ABCs. The 1960s also saw changes in their role in white-collar and professional spheres and more recognition of their skills, together with their access to education and improvements in the English language (Inglis, 1972: 269), which began to alter the status of ABCs. From humble beginnings as indentured labourers and single male miners, to market gardeners and merchants, to families with educated children and professional status, the Chinese diaspora's journey in Australia has been remarkable. With diminishing restrictions on immigration, professions and occupations, the opportunities for the Chinese in Australia to have a more significant presence and an enhanced place in the economy along with stronger connections between Australia and China has meant that the diaspora has far better standing in the community. However, Tung and Chung (p. 388) state that new arrivals may still experience difficulties with language barriers and changes to their way of life. It would seem that Tung and Chung believe that although those who have lived in Australia longer have had a chance to reassess and restructure traditional cultural practices, those newly arrived may still have to complete that process.

In 2011, there were approximately 25,000 Chinese migrants in Australia, compared to 8000 in 2000–2001. In 2011–2012, China was the largest source of permanent migrants to Australia after India. Female migrants outnumbered their male counterparts, 55% to 45%. As of August 2012, there were 185,000 China-born migrants working in Australia. Their occupations varied from professionals to trade workers. According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2013), the primary occupations were in professional roles (24%) whereas the fewest Chinese were in clerical and administrative roles (14%). Tung and Chung note that the Chinese diaspora in Australia came from three distinct areas: Hong Kong in the 1980s, Taiwan in the 1990s and then mainland China in the 2000s. Tung and Chung delve into the differences among the Chinese from these cultural groups and link these differences to the role of British colonialism in increasing westernization and exposure to capitalism and the predominant languages of the three groups. Tung and Chung also discuss the tension among these three subethnicities.

Racism and coping

Reports vary concerning the amount and the nature of racism and discrimination the Chinese diaspora in Australia has had to face, particularly in the early settlement stages. Ngan and Chan (pp. 49–116) provide extensive recounts of the racism and discrimination endured by ABCs in numerous interviews and two autobiographical chapters. In Chapter 3, Doreen Cheong discusses the racism experienced by ABCs but also explores Chinese racism. She recounts the racism expressed by her own parents, who forbade interaction with white Australians – an attitude justified by their belief that the Chinese were a superior race. The concept of intermarriage was often frowned upon by both sides and the term 'half-caste' was used until the 1960s, usually in a derogatory manner (p. 53). According to some accounts, the Chinese were a welcome and respected labour source, but that caused jealousy and resulted in racism. McGowan (2012: 27) describes the attitude towards the early Chinese arrivals as one that believed the Chinese to be both mysterious and inferior and describes the establishment of anti-Chinese leagues in some

country towns. These leagues did not survive however due to the reliance on the Chinese labour source and by the time they were beginning to crop up, the Chinese had already established themselves as market gardeners, merchants and even trades people. McGowan (2012: 28) describes the 1880s as a time where schoolyard taunting was likely and there were episodes of racist behaviour such as throwing stones, but the legal system treated the Chinese as having the same rights as Europeans and the perpetrators were punished accordingly (McGowan, 2012: 28). However, the biggest source of racism and discrimination was institutional and lasted for many decades. This was the enactment of the White Australia policy and the various legislative changes that preceded it. During the time of the White Australia policy, the perception of the Asian threat was enhanced and the British ethnic ideology was solidified (Moran, 2011). Following the Second World War, the government ideology of 'populate or perish' came to the forefront but excluded Asians and Jews and endorsed the belief that white Europeans were the ideal and that assimilation was expected (Ngan and Chan, p. 3). Most sources discuss the dictation test, which could be administered in any language, and was used to prevent Chinese migrants from entering the country, who, not surprisingly, often could not understand the test when it was given in French. Reg Mu Sung, in his autobiographical chapter (Chapter 4; Ngan and Chan, p. 93), recounts the tale of neighbours coming to his father's shop to complain of foreign cooking smells, an attitude he links to the White Australia policy. He further discusses the role of policy in reducing the Chinese population and the stigma attached to being Chinese through these years.

Despite the years of institutional and personal discrimination, the Chinese prevailed. The ABCs learned English, rose from indentured labourers to market gardeners and merchants, gained some status and settled with growing families. It is ironic that the multicultural policy that replaced the White Australia policy changed societal views and lessened the expectations of assimilation, but may have made assimilation more likely (Leong, 2000). It seems, therefore, that the Chinese in Australia, who should be called pioneers in the same way as the British thought of themselves, are a resilient and enduring group. It is clear that their ethnicity has altered and adapted to fit the hegemony in a way that has allowed both survival and progress, but nevertheless they have managed to retain their ethnicity in a way that allows them to maintain a distinct ethnic identity. There are marked differences between the ethnicity of long-settled ABCs and new arrivals, but nonetheless there is cultural retention. This may have been forced upon the younger generations, particularly through the White Australia policy years when difference made for difficulties. This resilience then may be seen as originating in the adversity of racism and discrimination that forced adaptation to the dominant culture. 'Resilience' refers to the ability to maintain healthy psychological and physical functioning despite adversity (Bonnano, 2004: 20; Pulla, 2013: 7), which the long-settled Chinese diaspora readily demonstrate. The link between positive emotion and social support with resilience (Bonnano, 2004: 25) may also explain the links among culture, ethnicity and resilience. The Chinese culture, which facilitates social support, can be seen as the means to resilience in this case, which suggests that racism and discrimination initially act as the trigger for the need to build resilience. Walsh (2006) states that people cope with a crisis by making meaning in the context of their social world and culture, again suggesting that with racism and discrimination as a trigger, the Chinese diaspora has been able

to build their resilience by utilizing its own ethnicity. In Reg Mu Sung's autobiographical chapter (Ngan and Chan, pp. 88–116), we see cultural and even spiritual coping for resilience as Reg recounts the story of the Chinese festival of Ching Ming, during which people visit deceased family members at the cemetery. He talks about the difficulty in coping with the loss of his family, father, sister and son, and the use of the *bai san* (prayer) as a balm for the pain. Reg also discusses the use of offerings – food, paper money and the burning of incense – as well as ceremonial actions (e.g. bowing) to honour lost family and ease the burden for those who remain. We could consider this cultural or spiritual coping with the ties to religion and the doctrines of Confucianism common to ABCs (Ngan and Chan, p. 20).

Conversely, it must be mentioned that in as much as racism and discrimination have led to a need for resilience for the Chinese diaspora, one that may have been built upon a foundation of ethnicity, it may also have been this ethnicity that led to the racism and discrimination. So we see that although racism and discrimination act as a stimulus for ethnic coping, this ethnic coping also acts as a stimulus for racism and discrimination. Indeed, the racism that was directed at early Chinese settlers was often justified by their different behaviour (Inglis, 1972: 273–274). McGowan (2012) comments that the Chinese were thought to be mysterious and alien. These comments demonstrate the recognition of difference between Chinese and mainstream ethnicities, and the cultural practices that the Chinese most utilized for coping and as an agency for resilience.

Chineseness

'Chineseness', the identification of homeland culture and the way in which Chinese engage with it in a voluntary or forced manner (Ngan and Chan, p. 9), has changed as a result of the modifications in policy and the resultant shift in societal attitudes. Ngan and Chan (p. 9) consider identity to be a social construct and a dynamic and fluid concept that changes in accordance with history and society. They discuss Chineseness as the Chinese identity, but justifiably claim that it is not a true ethnicity but one that has been constructed and embedded in community relationships. Those relationships are dynamic sociocultural factors that change over time and space. Chung (2012) discusses her childhood experience of racism and taunting, which caused her to reject her Chineseness to a degree, particularly in a public sense, as a child. She returned to her ethnicity and embraced it as an adult as societal attitudes and values shifted. Speaking about a visit to China as a young adult she states, '[i]n China I never felt more Australian and less Chinese', and she found herself treated as a foreigner and discriminated against for that reason (Chung, 2012). We can see here the outcome for the Chinese diaspora in Australia, particularly third-generation ABCs: hybridity. Hybridity was created to explain the issues of migrant communities and is intended to challenge the homogeneity of the assimilationist policies, which required migrant groups to conform to the white western hegemony (Ngan and Chan, p. 170). Ngan and Chan (p. 171) state that hybridity must not be taken to mean a mixing of homeland and host cultures, especially for ABCs who may have little actual experience of homeland (Leong, 2000). Indeed, it is thought that newer migrants, who travel back to their homeland more frequently, have a lived experience of homeland cultural practices and retain fresher linkages, and have an ethnicity that is different from long-settled ABCs (Hugo, 2010). Moreover, hybridity may be

viewed as the way in which identity is formed, with social contexts as input, perhaps from a number of sources, and as that space from which a new identity may be formulated. For example, while they were embracing mainstream religion in Australia, there were also Chinese cemeteries (McGowan, 2012: 30) and many continued the practice of returning people's bones to their homeland so that the soul of the departed could rest with her or his ancestors (Williams, 1999). It is in examples such as these that hybridization is readily visible. Tung and Chung (p. 375) discuss the idea that people who retain links and ties to their country of origin form important sources of social capital that in turn provide important economic and trade connections between the new country and country of origin. Ngan and Chan (pp. 141–164) also explore the notion of Chineseness through the life course. For Chineseness, there is an intersection between the life course and race that has an undeniable impact on ethnicity and the way it is perceived and expressed. Chineseness can also be considered a part of the path to resilience. With ethnic coping and spiritual coping clearly tied to culture and ethnicity, there is an inevitable link between Chineseness and resilience.

It is this Chineseness that has been retained despite adversity. Although there has never been a single distinct Chinese ethnicity, despite western thought (Ngan and Chan, p. 2), the long-settled ABCs have been able to retain their ethnicity – or perhaps adapt it to fit – in the host country when even the country itself seemed to oppose this. Multicultural policy certainly endorses the retention of the homeland culture (Moran, 2011), but as we have established, this is relatively new policy for Australia. Hugo (2010) states that linkages between homeland and the diaspora facilitate cultural retention and that this has become easier in a globalized world. Tung and Chung (pp. 372–373) discuss globalization as the means by which members of the Chinese diaspora are now able to develop a presence in both Australia and China. This does not however account for the long-settled ABCs who endured the discriminatory White Australia policy. Inglis (1972: 273) believes that the retention of ethnicity by this part of the Chinese diaspora is due to the fact that much of Chinese cultural practice is centred in the home and therefore hidden from view, so that those who were more likely to lose their connection with their culture were the younger, more educated people for whom 'fitting in' was more integral to success. Indeed, it appears that children of long-settled parents, who lived in Australia prior to multicultural policy and the freedoms it brought, were far more inclined to distance themselves from their Chinese ethnicity (Ngan and Chan, p. 145). Ngan and Chan (p. 196) explore the idea that linkages to the homeland do not automatically become a defining factor in identity formation or Chineseness. Many of their interviewees had little connection to their homeland but retained a notion of being Chinese. The authors argue that these decentred linkages become one of the elements in a new construction of Chineseness.

To conclude, the Chinese diaspora in Australia has demonstrated the capacity to both survive and thrive by having developed their roles from their earliest days as indentured labour to contemporary roles in political and business life that may be unequalled by any other ethnic group in Australia. The Chinese diaspora has both adapted and maintained their ethnicity in a unique way that has changed significantly in line with changing government ideology and subsequent changes in societal values and attitudes. The Chinese diaspora has also demonstrated a dual, cyclical relationship between ethnicity and resilience in that racism can be seen both as the stimulus for ethnic coping and ethnic coping

as the stimulus for racism The book by Ngan and Chan presents an exemplary view of Chinese ethnicity in Australia and the conceptual analysis of models of identity, hybridity and linkages demonstrates the impact of social, historical and cultural contextual factors in the building of ethnic identities for long-settled ABCs. Likewise, the article by Tung and Chung supports the notion that, being sourced from three distinct subethnicities, the Chinese diaspora in Australia retain their Chinese connections, and thereby are best able to improve economic ties and build social capital in the new country. This further enhances their connections to the country of origin. The life course theory supports the multifaceted impact on identity of the hegemonic host culture as well as contextual aspects from the country of origin.

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