

SUMMARY

The Instability of Chinese Identity and Chineseness:  
A Case Study of Australian Chinese

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What does it mean to be Chinese? What is the nature of Chineseness? These questions have been continuously debated by both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars and as long as the issue of identity/ethnicity continues to exist, they will be constantly examined.

Being Chinese is an individual set of characteristics that differs according to each person, varying from place to place. Therefore, a different approach is required to explore how *individual* Chinese people respond to these questions in accordance to various situations. As such, this article forms part of a larger study that examines identity development of Australian Chinese in the Australian multicultural context. The main points of this article draw upon the responses of Chinese people relating to the issue of Chinese identity and Chineseness.

Due to the heterogeneity and multiplicity in their backgrounds and experiences, which itself exhibits the instability and ambiguity of Chinese identity and Chineseness, this article observes Australian Chinese from two viewpoints: Firstly, the group of migrants who were born in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and secondly the group of remigrants who were born in a third country other than China, Hong Kong and Taiwan and also Australian born Chinese.

Upon critical analysis of the case study of these two group people, the following questions have been raised to formulate how paradoxical and ambivalent Chinese identity and Chineseness are. In what way do these people of the two groups define themselves? How do they talk about “being Chinese”? What does Chineseness mean to them? How do they succeed in constructing a Chinese-Australian binary opposition in order to confirm a Chinese identity? How do they insist on being an Australian unconsciously? How and when do Australian Chinese feel adequate or inadequate to be Chinese or to be Australian? In which way does Chinese identity and Chineseness display paradoxically and ambivalently?

The conducted analysis suggests that being Chinese can be a selected identity which is either based on needs or a strategy. The category of “Chinese” itself, which implies the complexity of heterogeneity and homogeneity, is a form of mixed fragments. The shifting, blurring and unstable of the internal boundaries inside “Chinese” determines hybridity, ambiguity and flexibility of being Chinese. Thus Chinese identity and Chineseness are paradox and ambivalence as well as the category of “Chinese” itself.