

# Creating New Identities: Chinese American Women Professionals in Greater Baltimore

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## Abstract

**This qualitative paper explores the attitudes, values and social practices of a small group of first generation Chinese American professional women in the Greater Baltimore Region. The research focuses on ethnic self-ascription, marriage, dating and interethnic social relations. To explore boundary persistence and acculturation, informants answered an online survey. After this stage, several informants were interviewed in a semi-structured format. Qualitative analysis suggests that Chinese immigrants selectively acculturate through situational interaction with co-ethnic and out-group actors. Informants interact with non-co ethnics at work, and increasingly in non-work settings. Some date and marry outside of the ethnic label, though most marry within group. In areas such as culinary habits and parenting, cultural attitudes and practices deemed “Chinese” prevail, but values identified as Chinese can vary by individual. Within the Chinese ethnic category, informants tend to prefer interaction with Chinese from the same region in China. Yet, interethnic dating and marriage do not necessarily weaken ethnic identity persistence. The central point is that Chinese American ethnic expression varies by individual, and is framed within place specific multi-scalar structures of regional culture, economy and attitudes toward immigrants and race.**

## Keywords

**Chinese Americans, Ethnic Identities, Ethnic Boundaries**

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## 1. Introduction

Identities are created by groups of people through the interpretation of experiences to create meaning and purpose. Ethnic identities, defined here as socially organized cultural difference, are a crucial reference point for patterns of cooperation and conflict within a state or society (Barth, 1969). Identities are now understood by social researchers as constructed and dynamic, thus changing course from traditional viewpoints that list cultural

or biophysical traits as characteristic of clearly delineated groups (Nagel, 1994). Ethnic identities are of interest to social researchers as societies in Europe, the Americas and Australasia have become more diverse, especially since the Second World War (Eriksen, 2010). In the current era, characterized by the intensified interactions of globalization, an upsurge of ethnic identities marks social conflicts at different scales—from control of nation-state institutions to cultural expression in neighborhoods. The alienating aspects of globalization processes have led to the intensified expression of identities, with people deploying information technologies to create new networks and social spaces (Smith, 2012). Yet, the process of adapting to a new social geographical and place context leads to adaptation of selected cultural attitudes and practices of the host society.

In this paper, I use Barth's approach to ethnic identity, understood as the social organization of cultural difference that is constantly recreated along boundaries. The study group consists of nine immigrant Chinese American women working professionally in the Greater Baltimore region. In terms of structure and agency debates in social research, I interpret qualitative data in this ongoing research project with an empirical orientation, with themes emerging from the participants answers to a brief survey and statements from semi-structured interviews. In this way, primary voice is given to the informants, with themes grounded in the data. The current paper represents an early stage overview of findings, part of a longer-term project studying Chinese immigration and ethnic identity in the Washington-Baltimore region.

## 2. Methods and Limitations

### 2.1. Methods

In this ongoing project, I explored the empirical data of discourses among first generation Chinese American professionals and students. Deploying Barth's construct of borders and transactions, I assessed informant self-ascription of ethnic identity, social behavior relevant to ethnic identity and how ethnic boundaries are maintained with values and practices. The interview questions were designed to reveal subtle but important changes in identities among informants. I considered the impact of place of origin, for example with the contrasts in ethnic identity based upon the region of origin of the informant's family (e.g. China, Hong Kong, Taiwan). Questions explored ethnic identity labels and self-ascription, friendship and dating preferences, attitudes toward intermarriage with specific groups, cultural values and priorities, politics and the receptivity or hostility of their current home region relative to previous places of residence in North America.

I have conducted the research from early 2014, and continue to gather data, in what is a long-term project. A small sample of informants have been contacted using the "snowball sampling method". Given the nature of the research questions, I did not need or wish to pursue a larger representative sample for the purpose of this paper, which is intensive and qualitative in nature. Initial informants told other potential participants about the project and provided me with further contacts. Several informants work at universities or associated research institutes in the region or attend educational institutions, and are thus easy to contact. Some have been contacted by email or social media. I sent a consent letter to prospective informants, and an invitation to sit with me for an interview or to answer open-ended, semi-structured questions by email. As of end of August 2015, I have received survey responses from nine informants. The group includes biomedical professionals, educators, business owners and students using a semi-structured format. Informants were found in a Chinese language school, a university club, an ethnic church and a large medical campus. I engaged in semi-structured interviews with five individual informants. Several informants preferred to answer questions by email. In this paper, I have integrated a discussion of social spaces and identities of nine total informants. All of the informants were female, despite my effort to draw participation from male Chinese immigrants. The age range was 19-39 years. One was a single stay-at-home mother, one a married stay-at-home mother, one still a student, while three worked in medical research or hospital administration, two as geospatial technicians. The interviews were conducted at informants' homes, place of work or in coffee shops. Several were recorded by digital voice device while for most of the interviews, notes were taken without recorder, to conform to the wishes of the informant. The interview settings varied as I wished to engage the informants in places comfortable for them.

### 2.2. Limitations

There are a number of limitations to a project such as this. Of course, one centers upon the scholar's positionality and subjectivities. I approached this project as a middle aged "white" Euro-American male who continued to work with Chinese American informants as part of a now long-standing interest in ethnic identities in Asian

American communities (Smith, 2008). My interests are both personal and professional. I am married to an immigrant from China who works in biomedical research. I have lived in East Asia for brief periods (Republic of Korea, one year; Japan and China for fortnight or month-long visits). Because I am not part of the in-group, I do not live with the structural challenges of “visible minority” status, or deal directly with the race discourse constraints that go with it (Wu, 2003; Omi & Winant, 2015). Likewise, the informants discourses are filtered through my ethnic, gender and theoretical lens, and this should be placed with and compared with other interpretations from scholars with subjective and social space positions different from mine. Ethnicity is often a crucial focus of identity but not the only one. Of great importance is the fact that gender, religious system and occupation can be very strong foci of identity, with boundaries and interactions negotiated along all of these aspects of social life (Essers & Benschop, 2009). I acknowledge that by centering the study on ethnic identities and not on other identities, this project gains specific insights but also has important limitations.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1. Lived Experiences and New Identities of Four Informants

The four immigrant narratives that follow illustrate the key themes of ethnic persistence with selective acculturation in the first generation informants. Their stories manifest how identities are rearticulated in creative ways, and how boundaries are negotiated and redefined. The narratives I chose also demonstrate the middle class social space position of the group, all of whom possess levels of symbolic (especially educational) capital higher than the US average. All names are pseudonyms.

Ms. Emily Cai is a 45 year old woman from Shanghai, Emily immigrated to the US in 1998. She worked in business in Delaware as a financial analyst. She has two daughters, aged 10 and 13, and she is married to a biomedical scientist who taught at Johns Hopkins Homewood campus, but now runs his own business. Emily lives in the Cub Hill area of southeastern Baltimore County, and is very pleased with the neighborhood due to its proximity to good public schools, in particular a magnet charter school for her older daughter. The neighborhood also has a concentration of Chinese and Korean families, with several census tracts having an Asian population of 7.5 to 10 percent (US Census Bureau. *American Community Survey*, 2013). While working in Wilmington Delaware, Emily considered buying a home in Cecil County, in the northeastern corner of Maryland adjacent to Delaware, due to the availability of large homes at relatively inexpensive prices. However, she decided against this due to the warnings of a “white” Euro-American friend who suggested that too many intolerant people lived in the area. Emily stereotypically described the area as “redneck” and cited her friend’s admonition as a key reason to relocate to an inner suburb closer to the Baltimore city-county boundary. Emily no longer works, but dedicates her time to taking her daughters to activities such as community orchestra, piano and swimming, a pattern fairly typical among Chinese American parents in the area.

In her choice of residence, particularly in the context of public education, Emily manifests a middle class perspective often found among Chinese Americans with similar levels of education and time in the US. Living in a neighborhood with considerable Asian presence, she can easily preserve contacts with co-ethnics. However, with her social and business skills and experiences outside of the ethnic community, she has made friends and business contacts to a degree that make her somewhat exceptional among this group of informants. Nevertheless, her choice of home also reflects the constraints placed upon immigrant families who are categorized through racialized discourses by less tolerant social actors among the ethnic majority.

Wu Mei is a 31 year old single GIS/remote sensing analyst who just completed a Master’s degree in the social sciences, Mei immigrated to the US in 2008. She came to the region because “The climate of Baltimore is similar to my hometown, and I heard the schools in Maryland normally had good educational qualities.” She related that interacting with other Chinese students was a low priority for her: “I chose Towson University because it had less Chinese students. To practice English, I don’t communicate with Chinese much here”.

When asked about her friendship choices and social interaction: “My good friends here are Americans. We took classes together and became good friends in life. So I never avoid interaction with Americans. But I kind of limit interaction with international students. I used to hang out with them and didn't feel it was a problem until I found many of them are partiers, clubbers, and not honest people... For the interaction with Chinese [it] just depends on if they are good people or not good.” When asked if she considers herself to be Chinese American, she self-ascribed as Chinese: “I consider myself to be Chinese. My American friends kid me that I was an American Chinese. I am different than the Chinese in China after stayed overseas for years. I learned some good manners

from here. But I feel the way I am thinking and my logics are still Chinese. And I know all the new Chinese slangs by internet.” In addition, she stated: “I think of myself as a Chinese only. Asians are different. Japanese and Korean are similar as us, but I don’t have any special feeling from people from other Asian countries. Actually, even though Chinese who are from the areas far from my hometown, I feel so different. I even feel they are a little more different than Japanese and Korean.” Wu Mei has dated both Chinese and non-Chinese, and does not set a strong boundary on this for marriage. She sees advantages in interacting with different people, in terms of personality and ethnicity.

Ms. Wang is a 28 year old single Mandarin Chinese teacher from Beijing. She immigrated to the US in 2007, and earned a multidisciplinary M.A. degree in 2009. She attended a regional university in Baltimore where her father’s friend is a professor. Ms. Wang finds Greater Baltimore to be friendly to her and enables her to engage in Chinese cultural practices without discomfort. She prefers most of her social interactions to be with other Chinese. When asked about her identity, and whether she considers herself to be Chinese or Asian American, her response was clear and emphatic: “I am Chinese, so of course I consider myself to be Chinese first, and no other options. So I don’t think this questions applies to me.”

To the email survey question about which values she identifies as Chinese, she noted “independent, open to making friends with Americans, actively involve[d] into the culture are more important... Sharing is also very helpful.” In terms of social practices, Ms. Wang lives in a neighborhood with a considerable number of Chinese, with whom she socially interacts. Yet, she is engaged to a non-Chinese white European-American, and does not see this as a problem in maintaining her fundamental ethnic identity. This response demonstrates that researchers should rethink assumptions about in-group marriage being necessary for ethnic identity persistence. Like the majority of Chinese immigrants in the region, she does not practice any religion.

Ms. Zhou is a 25 year old woman from Xi’an, Shaanxi province who completed a Master’s degree in Information Technology. She is married to a Chinese man from her home region-they have no children. She finds Greater Baltimore to be somewhat comfortable for her as a Chinese woman, particularly due to availability of Asian food markets and social clubs. Asked if regional origin in China is a factor in social interaction she stated: “From my personal experience, this situation only occurs to the people who came from Shanghai or Southern area. They tend to stay with their group all the time, even when they were in China, which is pretty common. All the other regions more tend to hang out together just because we are all Chinese, especially people from Northern China, we all speak Mandarin.”

Unlike Ms. Wang, she identifies in-group marriage as important for personal harmony and maintaining ethnic identity: “I have got married with a Chinese guy who has been living here for more than 10 years, mostly growing up here. My point is, at least we have the same culture background and the same mother language. The biggest problem, as my understanding, for a relationship is misunderstanding. Even when we talk in the same language, has the same culture background, there are still lots of misunderstandings happening every day. So I can’t really imagine dating with a person from another culture. I have friends who are married to Americans happily. This is just my thought about the relationships.”

### 3.2. Themes Emerging from Informants Discourses

Identity Self-Ascription and attitudes and behaviors toward intermarriage, friendship and politics: All of the informants but one self-ascribed as Chinese and not Chinese American. Several mentioned, often in a humorous way, that they had been influenced by the host society, but they did not see perceive the need to change their identity label. Of the nine informants who answered the emailed survey, none accepted the Asian American label, defying the notion of an emerging Asian American pan-ethnic identity, at least among this small group of first generation informants. All asserted the value of Chinese cultural forms as a way to stay emotionally grounded in daily life. However, the informants were not consistent in identifying Chinese values, though the centrality of family, friendships, hard work and respect for seniors did emerge as value themes. Several younger informants identified cultural openness and willingness to engage with non-Chinese as crucial values. None opposed intermarriage, though most were married or intended to marry other Chinese. However, Ms. Wang, who strongly asserted her Chinese identity, is engaged to a non-Chinese. Most informants described themselves as disengaged from politics and did not have strong opinions on the matter, though two younger informants identified as very liberal and one as very conservative. The interview and survey responses reported above demonstrate the difficulty of identifying one of more key behaviors in ethnic persistence. Marriage to another Chinese was important to some, but not all. Speaking the language was a given factor, but none of the informants

avoided workplace or informal social interaction with Americans.

Boundaries: Ethnicity becomes relevant when two or more groups are in contact, and enforce behaviors and defend boundaries. From the interviews and specific information provided, the boundary between recent Chinese immigrants and out-group members is more permeable than might be expected with first generation immigrants. Evidence for this includes the willingness of most informants to maintain friendships with outgroups members, in several cases these friendships were reported as best friends. One informant who only answered the email survey actually reported that she does not like her son attending school where there are too many Asians, for fear of inhibiting his ability to interact with ethnic majority actors. Of even greater import is the fact that none of the informants viewed intermarriage in a negative way, an attitude that would not have prevailed in earlier periods of US social history, such as the early twentieth century.

Social constructionist, boundary-oriented approaches to ethnic persistence assert that identities are not unchanging and immutable, but find expression through agency within a nexus of opportunities and constraints. The analysis of the informant discourses above confirms this thesis. The accounts reveal a common pattern of ethnic identity ascription, i.e. "I am Chinese" (though one of nine informants identified as Chinese American), but the attitudes and practices of the informants do not follow one consistent pattern. The central point of these research findings is that ethnic identity labels do matter, but the cultural content found within a particular in-group varies considerably, thus highlighting the changing and dynamic aspect of ethnic identities.

#### 4. Conclusions

- 1) Preliminary results indicate the informants construct new identities in highly individual ways, drawing from some cultural assumptions in common. Boundaries are preserved through varied means, but informants also imagine, think, create and behave in accord with their own individual, subjective understanding of who they should and can be; for different actors, hard or permeable boundaries will vary.
- 2) Viewing ethnicity as constructed along boundaries is a very useful approach when interpreting informant discourses, enabling a clearer focus than a "one-size-fits-all" trait inventory.
- 3) Identities constructed from selected cultural and social beliefs and symbols lead to the formation of new attitudes and practices.
- 4) Early stage empirical evidence for an "Asian" American identity is very weak within this informant group.

Within structural constraints of the host society's attitudes toward race and the particular political-economy in which immigrants migrate, the informants' discourses demonstrate agency by constantly and creatively rearticulating identities through a pastiche of cultural symbols (visual, linguistic) taken from their perceptions of their culture of origin. We should remember that this process takes place literally and figuratively within the context of the social geography of the Greater Baltimore Region, which has experienced rapid globalizing tendencies such as increased immigration, particularly within the last thirty years. Under the disorienting conditions of globalization, social actors often respond by intensifying their efforts to create meaning through "the power of identity" (Castells, 2004). The result is a complex *mélange* of traditional Chinese attitudes and practices, translocally expressed, selectively adopting symbols and practices from the host society, while retaining those elements of cultural inheritance necessary for identity and meaning (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996).

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