

A Work in Progress: An investigation into the combined effect of language maintenance and acculturation on the hybridisation of second-generation Chinese-Australians

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At first glance, Chinese-Australian may simply appear to be the combination of two distinct and homogenous cultures within an individual to constitute a hybrid identity.¹ However, this “hyphenated identity” only indicates the existence of hybridity but fails to illustrate the complexity individuals face during the process of reconciling two disparate cultures.²

The nature of hybridisation experienced by second-generation Chinese-Australians can be illustrated through the changing dominance of Chinese and English. For numerous second-generation Chinese-Australians, Chinese is both their mother tongue and first dominant language.³ However, through the indirect and direct exposure to school – a secondary agent of socialisation – English has had the opportunity to challenge the dominance of Chinese and preconceptions of its role during second-generation Chinese-Australians’ acculturation into Australian society. An inherent need to belong within the school environment has also weakened the dominance of Chinese to demonstrate how language is both a barrier and a bridge for connecting with a specific culture. By understanding this, the importance of the ethnic individual’s connection and understanding of their context during hybridisation is underpinned. Therefore, the continual conflict between English and Chinese during socialisation highlights the complexity of the hybridisation of second-generation Chinese-Australians’ through individual attempts to find a resolution.

The school environment has been key to second-generation Chinese-Australians’ acculturation to Australian society marked by indifference towards their Chinese heritage and the shift in dominance of language from Chinese to English.⁴ However, the inclusion of more ‘Australian’ elements in second-generation Chinese-Australians has reflected the fluidity of hybridisation, where different identities are brought together without any one obliterating the other.⁵ One aspect which highlights this is language. Although the mother tongue of Chinese is “*fragile and*

¹ Noble, Greg and Paul Tabar. “On being Lebanese-Australian: hybridity, essentialism and strategy among Arabic-speaking youth.” *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging*, Ed. Ghassan Hage. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002. 128-31. Print.

² *ibid*

³ Focus groups 1-3 comprising of both male and female Year 12s.

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*Names changed with permission

⁵ Noble, Greg and Paul Tabar. “On being Lebanese-Australian: hybridity, essentialism and strategy among Arabic-speaking youth.” *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging*, Ed. Ghassan Hage. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002. 144. Print.

*easily lost in the early years of school*⁶, the hybridisation of Chinese and English, often referred to as 'Chinglish',⁷ illustrates how the hybridity of Chinese-Australians is not only a way of negotiating the logic of a situation but an attempt to bring together incommensurable differences for both survival and continuity.⁸ The symbiotic relationship of Chinese and English in 'Chinglish' has not only underpinned the fluidity of hybridisation but also the strategy behind using language, a tool for moulding identity to suit specific situations, to negotiate the differences between Chinese and Australian culture within an individual identity.

⁶ Cummins, Jim. "Bilingual Children's Mother Tongue: Why Is It Important for Education?" *Sprogforum* 7:19 (2001), 19-20.

⁷ Belle, from Focus Group 1 comprising of 5 female Year 12s.

⁸ Noble, Greg and Paul Tabar. Op. cit.