

## **Complexities of Chineseness: Reflections on race, nationality and language**

Li Wei

UCL Institute of Education

University College London

[li.wei@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:li.wei@ucl.ac.uk)

On the evening of 24<sup>th</sup> February 2020, an undergraduate student in my university's Law School was attacked by three white youths on Oxford Street in central London. One of them shouted at him, 'I don't want your coronavirus in my country'. The student suffered a broken cheek bone and his right eye and nose were severely bruised.<sup>1</sup> All the global news reports about the incident mentioned that the student was Singaporean. The youths were later convicted of racist attacks. But as some comments on social media pointed out, Singaporean is a nationality not a race (see Lim, Chen and Hiramoto 2021 on Chinese Singaporean linguistic ideology in this special issue). The fact that the student was ethnic Chinese was rarely mentioned in the news reports. Yet as the student himself said in a number of media interviews, his physical appearance was clearly a key reason for the youths to attack him, though they would not be so sophisticated to tell the difference between nationality and race.

I took an interest in the incident for a variety of reasons: my son is a fellow law student and knows the victim; I have a particular interest in issues of race, nationality and language in Singapore and more generally; I am also interested in people's perceptions of and mundane reactions to race through everyday practices such as National and Ethnicity Talk (NET) (Zhu and Li, 2016a); and I have personal experiences dealing with these issues, in particular, with the complexities of Chineseness that studies in this special issue collectively explore. As the editors and contributors of this special issue point out, Chineseness has hitherto received little attention by researchers from a raciolinguistic perspective. The focus on marginalised groups gives the studies in this collection special value. I echo and endorse what the authors of the articles in this collection have argued: that communities on the margins are often better positioned to challenge the orthodoxies embodied and imposed by the centre. They are therefore 'fertile ground for the investigation of how people make sense of different understandings of authenticity, legitimacy, and language ownership' (Wong, Su and Hiramoto, 2021, p. 133) as the editors say in the Introduction. In what follows, I reflect on my own experiences with Chineseness on the margins with a number of personal stories. I also want to explore ways of taking the discussion and research forward in future studies.

### **Minoritization multiplied**

I am Manchu-Chinese, born in Beijing, China. I grew up during Mao's Cultural Revolution where race and ethnicity were politicised to such an extent that the so-called ethnic minorities, i.e. non-Han, must declare their absolute loyalty to Mao, the Communist Party and the central government by denouncing their own cultural traditions and practices. The social norms, including everyday social practices, were dictated by the Party whose leadership was, and still, is predominantly Han, and must be accepted absolutely and uniformly. The Manchus, having been the ruling race of the last imperial dynasty before China became a republic, Qing/Ching (1636-1912), were blamed for failures to defend China against foreign invasions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and for giving up significant territorial ownership to foreign powers, including the cession of Hong Kong and Macau. Qing was overthrown by the Han nationalists. As such, people of Manchu origin could protect

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-51736755>.

themselves from persecution during the Cultural Revolution by not revealing their ethnicity. This was fairly easy because the Manchus look very similar to the dominant Han people in physical appearance, and they shared a lot of things in common including food and language.

My first awareness that we were of a different ethnic group was when I saw my grandfather writing in Manchu, a Tungusic language whose script is taken from Mongolian and vertically written. I thought that he was drawing pictures. I did learn a couple of sayings in Manchu from my grandfather. But I cannot read or write Manchu or speak and comprehend it. At school, my parents put mine and my sister's ethnicity down as Han. The year Mao died, 1976, I got into the Beijing Foreign Language School. It was the only school in China during the Cultural Revolution where foreigners, mostly western communists, were allowed to teach Chinese children directly. One day, an American teacher who was married to a Chinese army doctor was talking about facial appearances of different nationalities and racial groups. She asked me to stand up in front of the class and said to my classmates that I had 'a typical Chinese face'. I cannot recall exactly how I felt. But I must have felt something because I told the story to my parents when I got home. They didn't say anything but my mother brought out a black-and-white picture of an old lady in what appeared to be a very fancy dress. I immediately asked, 'Is that grandma?', because the lady in the picture resembled my grandmother so much. My mother said very calmly and quietly, '*Cixi taihou*' (Empress Dowager Cixi), and took the picture away. I was shocked and turned away myself. Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), the mother of Emperor Tongzhi, was portrayed in China as a ruthless despot whose reactionary policies led to the national humiliation by losing the Opium Wars and who was solely interested in prolonging her own power as the de facto ruler behind the curtains. I knew my grandma well, and I really could see the resemblance, a fact that disturbed me deeply. I felt that I finally understood why my parents did not want people to know we were Manchu.

After the university system in China was revived in the late 1970s, the government gradually introduced policies to improve access to higher education by ethnic minority students. So applicants of certain ethnic minorities could have bonus points added to their examination results to increase their chances of going to universities. But lo behold, the Manchus were not given this preferential treatment. To be honest, this did not bother us very much because in our mind, ethnic minorities were from the remote, mountainous parts of China and did not speak good Chinese, whereas most of the Manchu people we knew lived in cities and Chinese was their only language. Since the late 1980s, however, there has been enhanced awareness of the significance and potential tangible benefits of understanding and promoting the Manchu heritage. Bertolucci's multi-Oscar winning film, the Last Emperor, contributed a great deal to this raised awareness. The Chinese government realised the world-wide interest in the Manchu culture, including its language, and began to set up conservation areas, museums, and research centres in the northeastern provinces of China where there are significant numbers of Manchu people. Some universities also offered Manchu language classes. Nowadays, the Manchu culture is typically represented through traditional dresses, folk songs and music, and food. At the annual Spring Festival, Chinese New Year, celebrations, Manchu is definitely included alongside the other officially recognised ethnic minority groups in the performances. And one can buy greetings cards and other souvenir with both Chinese and Manchu scripts. And of course in the Forbidden City in the centre of Beijing, one can see the original Manchu-Chinese bilingual signs on most buildings. Nevertheless, there is no Manchu-medium school. And there is no monolingual Manchu speaker. All Manchu children are educated in Chinese and all Manchus use Chinese as their primary if not the only language.

I left China in the mid-1980s and did not experience first-hand any of such more favourable treatment. In a way it helped to simplify life quite a bit. I had little hesitation in

being classified as Chinese. And as with lots of other ethnic minority people from China living in the west, I never talked to anyone about myself as being Manchu unless I knew that they had a special interest in the Manchu culture. But even then I felt a slight unease to be identified as Manchu because I do not actually know the language and my upbringing was not much different from that of most others of my generation in urban centres in China, apart from some vague awareness of our family background. After all, my American teacher at the Beijing Foreign Language School thought I had ‘a typical Chinese face’! It would be just too complicated to explain any difference. Nevertheless, the fact that I am Manchu but do not speak the language must have contributed to my interest in the phenomenon of language maintenance and language shift. I became fascinated that many of the British-born Chinese children and youth did not speak their parents’ languages and operated mainly or even only in English. I saw similarities of the language shift experience of the Manchus in China. I decided to study the ongoing intergenerational language shift in the Chinese community in Britain (Li, 1994).

Whilst in Beijing, our family had quite a few ethnic Korean friends. They gave us home-made kimchi regularly. We heard them speaking Korean at home. I envied them because they managed to keep something distinctive for themselves. While in Newcastle, in the North East of England, where I worked and lived between 1986 and 2006, I got to know an ethnic Korean family from China. This family had a daughter who was born in China. The parents came to do postgraduate degrees in England. The Korean families in China are famous for their capacity to maintain their ethnic language at home. This family in Newcastle was no exception. The parents spoke Korean most of the time with the daughter and with each other. English was of course in the environment and the daughter went to the local school where she had to learn to speak English. The parents did speak some English to the daughter in order to help her to improve her proficiency level faster. The daughter knew Chinese well and spoke it with other Chinese-speaking children. The family had a number of Chinese friends in Newcastle, including me. And we spoke Chinese most of the time, with some English. The grandparents of the family and other relatives were all in China.

Things began to change. About three years after they came to England, they had a son. The parents decided that they would speak only Korean to him, and to the daughter. They realised that the daughter had begun to use quite a lot of English and they were concerned that she might lose Korean. And with a new additional member of the family and lack of grandparent support, they felt that it was too much to try to maintain both Korean and Chinese while developing their English skills as well. The school that the daughter went to also urged the parents to use more English with her, because it was assumed to be helpful to the daughter’s school’s work. I noticed a very visible change in their family language policy, which, in hindsight, was clearly influenced by complex raciolinguistic ideologies: they wanted to maintain Korean because that’s an important part of their ethnic identity; the school saw the daughter as an immigrant child and an English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) learner, and wanted the parents to use more English at home to help her with the school work; they were unsure what to do with their Chinese because on the one hand they knew it would be useful to maintain it and they wanted to keep their contacts with their Chinese friends going, but on the other hand they also felt that it was too much to try and keep all three languages going at the same time.

Things took a more drastic turn when the father completed his doctoral degree and got a job in London. They family moved down south and chose to settle in the south west London suburb of New Malden. New Malden is famous for having a large number of Korean residents, and came to the public attention in the 1990s because the number of North Korean defectors in the area. I had never asked the family directly why they chose to settle there but they did say to me that they really loved the fact that there were a lot of Korean supermarkets

and restaurants and more importantly, a Korean school for their children. The mother said that it was less of a struggle to try and teach the children Korean now that they could learn it at the Korean school rather than having teaching sessions at home. The parents could just use it with the children as a normal, everyday practice at home. When I visited them just over a year after they moved to London, I had a really interesting experience. As I was walking towards the home with the father, a neighbour came past and said hi. Clearly not having seen me before, she asked me, 'Are you from Korea too?' Without thinking, I said, 'No, I'm from China'. But I felt instantly that my friend was a little embarrassed. The neighbour looked a little surprised and asked my friend if he spoke Chinese too. My friend did not answer it and asked the lady where she was going instead. I realised that there was something intricate, but did not pursue it with my friend on that occasion. Again with hindsight and from a raciolinguistic perspective, I can see that the lady must have assumed that people spoke their 'own' language at home. Because my friend and I looked physically different from her, she must have thought that we would be speaking either Korean or Chinese but not English with each other.

On a later visit, my friend was going to host a party and had invited a few of their Korean friends. As if to prepare me in advance, he told me in some detail what the family did after they moved to London. They made friends with a number of Korean families in the area and began to identify themselves 'just as Koreans', as he said to me. This is his explanation,

'In English there is just one word Korean. And I'm Korean, so I'm telling people the truth when I say I'm Korean. I don't think they cared where exactly I came from. There's no need to explain that I'm from China. I'm Korean anyway.'

He said to me that at the beginning he felt a little sheepish in front of the Koreans from Korea because he had never been to Korea himself by then. But the family made a conscious and strategic decision to take a long holiday, about four weeks, in South Korea and visited most of the well-known sites. After the trip, my friend said that they all felt more comfortable to identify themselves 'just as Koreans'. He and his wife stopped speaking Chinese to the children. Even though they were all still holding Chinese passports at the time, they behaved, for all intents and purposes, as Koreans with no apparent complications. In fact, my friend explained to me that he deliberately avoided speaking Chinese in public because he did not want anyone to think that he was a North Korea defector - some North Koreans know Chinese as it is a popular foreign language in schools in North Korea.

There are probably thousands of people of ethnic minority background from China living overseas. Some have much more complicated lives than my Korean friends and I do. On an academic trip to Kazakhstan a few years ago, I met several Kazakhs from Xinjiang, China. They spoke Chinese to me and told me stories about their struggles as Chinese Kazakhs who did not speak Russian and had to learn 'proper Kazakh' from the locals. I also know several Mongolians from China, in the UK, in Japan and elsewhere, who are very much aware of their ethnicity, and language, but choose to present themselves as Chinese to 'make life simple'. Most of such people with whom I have discussed the topic of race and nationality argue that we are already minorities in the countries we are living in now. Telling people that we were minorities in and from China would be too unnecessarily complicated. People want simpler lives.

## **In the diaspora**

I have two sons who were born in England. They have never lived in China. They know enough Chinese to have simple conversations, but they do not read or write Chinese. They know the Manchu connection of the family – my wife is also Manchu-Chinese. On occasions where they need to tick an ethnic category, they would choose ‘Chinese’. The schools that they went to did have Mandarin classes. But they, alongside some other ethnic Chinese pupils, either born in the UK or from other countries such as Malaysia, were excluded from the classes, because they were assumed to have known Chinese already. They did choose to take standard Chinese language exams at the school. And a Chinese teacher at the school who had two British-born children herself, understood my sons’ situation well and helped them prepare for the tests, especially in reading and writing. However, when we travel to China for holidays, they often feel embarrassed because they do not understand everything that is said to them, especially when it is said in a local accent, and their responses can be rather slow as they process the information. They cannot read Chinese menus in restaurants. Ien Ang has written critically on not speaking Chinese as an ethnic Chinese in the west (2001). From a raciolinguistic perspective, their experiences and struggles with Chinese, and people’s assumptions of and reactions to their linguistic proficiency, are interesting topics to explore.

At university and elsewhere, my sons have made a lot of Chinese friends from China, Singapore, the UK, and other places. They speak some Chinese, but mostly communicate with each other in English. They share many cultural practices, especially food. Yet there is a constant debate amongst them whose way of cooking, serving and eating food, or of doing other ‘cultural things’, is the authentic Chinese way. For instance, the northern Chinese would have dumplings for the Chinese New Year and other festivals, whereas the southern Chinese traditionally have hot-pot. As many of the ethnic Chinese students from Singapore and Hong Kong are of southern Chinese origin, they think having hot-pot is the proper way of celebrating Chinese New Year. What’s more, the soup for the hot-pot is flavoured with spices already and they put all sorts of things - seafood, meats and vegetables - in it. In the north of China, when people have hot-pot, they have it in the Manchu and Mongolian way with clear, unflavoured soup, and thinly sliced lamb only. My sons have also gained an awareness of the different kinds of Chinese spoken by people from different parts of the Sinophone world. They have started using labels such as ‘a Taiwanese speaker’, ‘a Hakka’, or ‘a Cantonese speaker from Hong Kong’ (see the article by Wong (2021) in this special issue for a discussion of how differences among Sinitic languages can become ideologized in a politically charged climate).

Until the recent political changes in Taiwan, the Kuomintang government who fled to Taiwan from mainland China after its defeat in the civil wars with the communists kept the claim that they were the real keepers of authentic Chinese cultural values and traditions. Whilst mainland China is striving to modernise itself using western models where they see fit, Taiwan seems to have maintained a great deal of traditional Chinese cultural practices. One of the most visible, and most relevant to the present discussion, is the use of traditional, unsimplified, Chinese characters. In fact, one can still see newspapers and books printed with vertical, right-to-left writing. Geopolitically though, Taiwan is on the margins of the Sinophone world. It is excluded from the United Nations and all major international organization. It can participate in international events only under the name Chinese Taipei. The idea that Taiwan could possibly be the keeper of Chinese traditions seems laughable to the mainlanders, especially the young. Yet, many observers, including those in mainland China, have remarked on the fact that lots of traditional Chinese practices are disappearing fast in mainland China but are kept alive in Taiwan. The pro-independence camp in Taiwan, though, wants to sever all ties with China. How they deal with the traditional links with the mainland is going to be a major challenge to them. The article by Su and Chun (2021) in this issue examines ideological tensions behind the debate over the use of the simplified Chinese

script versus the traditional script in Taiwan. It reminds me of the tweets by the Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen on the Winter Solstice and the New Year's Day and people's reactions to them.<sup>2</sup> On 21<sup>st</sup> December 2020, Tsai tweeted a greeting in which she mentioned the Chinese terms *Dongzhi* (Winter Solstice) and *tangyuan*, glutinous rice balls that are traditionally eaten in the south of China on winter solstice. Her tweets were immediately mocked by social media users for using pinyin to represent these terms, because pinyin is widely regarded as a mainland China invention for Putonghua, the standardized national language of China, whereas Tsai has been advocating independence of Taiwan from China. She managed to redeem herself somewhat in her New Year's Day greeting on twitter where she used *Zhuyin fuhao* or Bopomofo, the romanization system for Mandarin Chinese that was invented during the Republican period at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as pinyin. She also added the romanization of the Taiwanese pronunciation of the greeting. No doubt such controversies and debates will continue.

### **Imagination and thinking on the margins**

My own research on the language issues of Chinese communities on the margins has been influenced by the work of scholars in diaspora studies. Notably, contributions by Gonzales (2021) and Leung (2021) also focus on Chinese diasporic communities in Manila and San Francisco respectively. Diaspora studies scholars point out that transnationals often construct and negotiate their identities and everyday lives in ways that overcome the ethnic identity versus assimilation dilemma. Transnationals also often try and suppress or neutralise any 'internal' differences and establishing commonality and connectivity with people with whom they can find shared heritage in order to build a diasporic imagination (Cohen, 2008; Zhu and Li, 2018). This diasporic imagination provides a site of hope and new beginnings (Brah, 1996). Rather than looking back, sideways, or from a distance, in a nostalgic effort of recovering or maintaining their identity, they reinvent notions of who they are and where and what home is by essentially looking forward. Their senses of the core or centre versus the periphery or margin, and of the past, the present and the future, are shaped by their personal experiences, the context they find themselves in and the aspirations they have for themselves and their families.

Language plays a crucial role in constructing the diasporic imagination and in dealing with raciolinguistic ideologies and practices (Li and Zhu, 2013; Zhu and Li, 2016b). I have been promoting translanguaging both as a communicative practice that addresses identity dilemmas and paradoxes by breaking the one-race-one-language norm and as an analytical lens for the investigation of non-essentialising and denaturalising linguistic and other semiotic practices (Li, 2018; Zhu and Li, 2018). Through creative and subversive practices, translanguaging transforms the power relations between named languages and the ideological assumptions about users of specific named languages, as well as the subjectivities of the language users themselves. The articles in this special issue show ample examples of how people in Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong and in the Chinese communities elsewhere in the world assert, challenge and redefine Chineseness through innovative and strategic use of linguistics resources of various kinds. They also remind us of the significance of history and context which give special meanings to the linguistic practices. Roche's (2021) study in the special issue, in particular, demonstrates that translanguaging takes on very different meanings and socio-political significance in different contexts.

---

<sup>2</sup> Tsai Ing-wen's tweets on the Winter Solstice and the New Year's Eve:

<https://twitter.com/iingwen/status/1340938987624513542>,

<https://twitter.com/iingwen/status/1344959563745828864>

The studies in this collections also show that Border Thinking (Anzaldúa, 1987; Mignolo, 2000) is necessary and useful in order to take forward what this special issue has started, i.e. to critically interrogate Chineseness on the margins from a raciolinguistic perspective. The lived experiences of the individuals and communities on the margins must feature more prominently in the production of knowledge of the complex relations between race, nation and language. Moreover we need to find alternative languages of expression and use alternative knowledge traditions to approach the issues under investigation, that is, languages and traditions that are different from the dominant, English-based ones in the scholarly literature. It may seem somewhat paradoxical then, we may need to use a more Chinese way of thinking, analyzing and articulating (Chen, 2010). This, however, does not mean a uniform way. Whilst the Chinese may want to think of their nation as the centre of the world by naming their country as the Middle Kingdom, the rest of the world are still seeing China as the periphery, on the margins as it were. The studies in this special issue helps to diminish the illusion of the Chinese as a homogenous, monolithic group. We need Chineseness, in all its multiplexity, to interrogate and understand the complexities of language and race. Living as Chinese isn't simple and it will never be.

### References:

- Ang, I., 2001. *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*. Routledge, London.
- Anzaldúa, G., 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco, CA.
- Brah, A., 1996. *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*. Psychology Press, Hove.
- Chen, K., 2010. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Duke University Press.
- Cohen, R., 2008. *Global Diasporas*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) Routledge, Oxford.
- Gonzales, W., 2021. Chinese, neither, or both?: the Lannang language identity and its relationship with language. *Lang. Commun.* 77, 5-16.
- Leung, G., 2021. “Maybe useful to the future generation but not my own”: how “useful” is Mandarin really for contemporary Hoisan-heritage Chinese Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area? *Lang. Commun.* 76, 121-130.
- Li, W., 1994. *Three Generations, Two Languages, One Family: Language Choice and Language Shift in a Chinese Community in Britain*. Multilingual Matters, Clevedon.
- Li, W., 2018. Translanguaging as a practical theory of language. *Applied linguistics*, 39(1), 9-30.
- Li, W., Zhu, H., 2013. *Diaspora: Multilingual and intercultural communication across time and space*. *Aila Review*, 26(1), 42-56.
- Lim, J., Chen, S., Hiramoto, M., 2021. “You don't ask me to speak Mandarin, okay?": ideologies of language and race among Chinese Singaporeans. *Lang. Commun.* 76, 100–110.
- Mignolo, W., 2000. The many faces of cosmo-polis: Border thinking and critical cosmopolitanism. *Public Culture*, 12(3), 721-748.
- Roche, G., 2021. Lexical necropolitics: the raciolinguistics of language oppression on the Tibetan margins of Chineseness. *Lang. Commun.* 76, 111–120.
- Su, H., Chun, C., 2021. Taiwaneseeness, Chineseness, and the traditional and simplified Chinese scripts: Tourism, identity, and linguistic commodification. *Lang. Commun.* 77, 35-45.
- Wong, A., 2021. Chineseness and Cantonese tones in post-1997 Hong Kong. *Lang. Commun.* 76, 58–68.

- Wong, A., Su, H., Hiramoto, M., 2021. Complicating raciolinguistics: Language, Chineseness, and the Sinophone. *Lang. Commun.* 131-135.
- Zhu H., Li W., 2016a. 'Where are you really from?': Nationality and ethnicity talk in everyday interactions. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 7 (4), 449-470.
- Zhu H., Li W., 2016b. Transnational experience, aspiration and family language policy. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 37(7), 655-666.
- Zhu H. & Li W., 2018. Translanguaging and diasporic imagination. In: Cohen, R., Fischer, C., (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*. Routledge, London, pp.106-112.
-