

# In the Eyes of the Chinese

## Affective Construction of Cultural Identity

*Hsin-I Cheng*

Santa Clara University - USA

### Abstract

There are officially 56 ethnic groups in China, and of its 1.2 billion people, more than 95% are identified as *Han* [China] people (State Ethnic Affairs Commission of PRC 2011). Yet the ways in which 'Chineseness' has been researched in the field of communication have mostly employed a geographical focus and been reduced to a singular ethnic, national, and cultural salience (So 2010). This article employs Ahmed's (2004) model of the "cultural politics of emotion" to examine the political and cultural economy of "being Chinese." Four focus-group discussions at a university in southeast China were conducted with a total of 27 participants from the northeast, southeast, and southwest of China. I first trace how emotions are effects of social norms and public discourse. I further describe a brief history of how racial and ethnic attitudes have developed in China to provide the context of this study. Themes emerged from the interviews include "blood lineage," "political solidarity," and "spatial centrality." The article concludes with implications that racial consciousness carried in China serves as an example of the need to internationalize intercultural communication scholarship by focusing on non-Western contexts to broaden our understanding of cultural concepts.

**Keywords:** *Affection, Chinese identity, Internationalizing race, Racial nationalism*

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### Introduction

With China's "rising peacefully" (Shao 2009), a phrase used to describe the country's 21st-century emergence as a peaceful global leader with soft power, its influence on other nations has gained increasing notice in the field of communication. For example, a special forum on events that have occurred in China appeared in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* in 2008. The topics included significant events such as the Beijing Olympics, Tibet's struggle, and the Sichuan earthquake, all of which shed light on the dynamic relationship between China and the United States in the past, present, and future. This essay examines contemporary Chinese identity beyond the aforementioned macro-level analyses and explores the daily negotiations of the Chinese people's cultural membership.

There are officially 56 ethnic groups in China, and of its 1.2 billion people, more than 95% are identified as *Han*[China] people (State Ethnic Affairs Commission of PRC 2011). Yet, the ways in which 'Chineseness' has been researched in the field of communication have mostly employed a geographical focus and been reduced to a singular ethnic, national, and cultural salience (So 2010). Lau (1995) found that most Chinese communication research focused on the Chinese history and communication development in China and its political relationships with other nations. Concerns have been raised over how research on 'Chineseness' has been heavily represented by Confucianism and the lives of urban Chinese elites whose ideologies are often driven by ethno-nationalism (Polumbaum 2003, Zhao 2010). Keeping the idea in mind that authenticity is reconstructed through social subjects' self-making (Halualani 2001), this article addresses how 'Chineseness' as a cultural identity is being articulated by contemporary Chinese college students.

I apply Ahmed's (2004) model of the "cultural politics of emotion" to examine the political and cultural economy of "being Chinese." I first trace how emotions are effects of social norms and public discourse. Connecting emotions to the larger environment avoids individualizing affects. I further describe a brief history of how racial and ethnic attitudes have developed in China to provide the context of this study. I also

discuss themes emerging from the interviews of “blood lineage,” “political solidarity,” and “spatial centrality.” The article concludes with implications that racial consciousness carried in China serves as an example of the need to internationalize intercultural communication scholarship by focusing on non-Western contexts to broaden our understanding of cultural concepts.

## Race and Affection in Communication

Belongingness is an emotional topic filled with anxiety, suspicion, anger, hostility, affinity, and hope. Cultural markers such as race and ethnicity carry significant structural implications on how people are situated in the world, which in turn shape how they engage in racial, ethnic, and cultural marking in their interactions. Individuals constantly participate in hierarchical ideology in which certain groups' ways of life and characteristics are exoticized, othered, and subjugated (Moya & Markus 2010:17–20). Such participations are accomplished through the fluid yet complicated relationship between these markers and emotions espoused. Contextualization to seek particularity in the processes of feeling similar to or different from a group becomes imperative.

Communication scholars have examined the impact of race and ethnic constructions in the United States, which are signified based on the ideology and practices of diversity derived from the legacy of slavery and indenture projects.[1] Although racial and ethnic constructions and implications have received scholarly attention in the field, the United States has been the primary context for such research (Moon 2010, Shome 2010). Recently, transnational effects on racial/ethnic constructions have gained increased interdisciplinary attention in attempts to unpack the ways in which racial, ethnic, and cultural categories are sustained and lived in people's affective imaginations of self and other (Adekunle & Williams 2010, Caliendo & McLlwain 2011, Collier 2005, Gladney 2010, Shome 2010).

Writing about the “public nature of emotions and the emotive nature of publics” Ahmed (2004) has explicated that “emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside...[I]t is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others... the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others”(10–14). Ahmed unfolds how some objects and people *become* offensive or disgusting during interactions. Communicative moments with those who are different from or similar to us are emblematic of how past experiences and historical associations evoke emotions of affinity or negation. These affections become “a contact zone”(Ahmed 2004:87) that provides the driving force underneath one's identification or lack thereof. When feelings like disgust occur upon contact as a response to certain bodies, other distancing affections, such as abjection, are manifested to maximize the distance from the undesirable bodies.

## Racial Discourse in China

Frank Dikötter (1992) has argued that the concept of race is in great need of contextualization for its unique development in Chinese society instead of viewing it as an issue only in the West. Focusing his argument on Chinese “racial nationalism” he calls for emphasis on racial practices and discourses in China to expand our understanding beyond the “seemingly ideal white racism”(Dikötter 1994:406). Scholars have responded by engaging in contextualization of the Chinese racial discourses in which, apart from U.S. and European experiences, ethnicity, race, and culture were and continue to be incorporated into China's nation-building project (Lin 2010, Shao 2009, Shih 2002).

According to Yoshihiro (2003), Chinese nationalism should be examined within the context of influences of European Orientalists such as Albert Terrien de Lacouperie and Japanese scholars such as Torii Ryūzō in the early 20:th century. An important Chinese nationalist Zhang Binglin conceptualized race as the distinction between *wen* “the civilized” and *ye* “the uncultured.” He believed in cultural evolution in which “the white race was as virtuous, intelligent and skilled as the yellow [Han] race” and was convinced that “cultural degeneracy would have its biological consequences”(Dikötter 1992:123). In the absence of a nation state, Chinese revolutionary elites such as Zhang borrowed the Japanese term *minzuzhuyi* “racism” and juxtaposed it with *guo* “country” to express a nationalist vision based on race, which was used to

enthral affection for nation building. As a consequence, the preservation of the race, state, and Confucius culture became synonymous (Lin 2010; Yoshihiro 2003:13–21).

Racial solidarity of the Han people was the driving force in overthrowing the Qing Dynasty led by the Manchu people in 1911 and establishing the Chinese Republic (Dikötter 1992:108, Shao 2009). This imperative component in nation building is evident in the revolutionist president Sun Yat-sen's statement: "The greatest force [in solidarity] is common blood" (Dikötter 1994:406). Influenced by the transnational discourse and inspiration to build a nation-state, the concept of the Chinese as a race bound by blood was then ideated and remains alive (Leibold 2011). This global–local and past–present interconnectedness is the setting in which various identities are articulated. As Shome (2010) wrote: "The spatial, geopolitical, and historical parameters *that produce otherness also simultaneously secure certain affective planes of belonging and non-belonging* through such production" (emphasis original, 164). With its particular context, an understanding of the affective ways contemporary Chinese people construct their membership conceptions sheds light on various driving forces behind Chinese intercultural relationship building.

## Methodology

To discern how Chinese college students make sense of 'Chineseness,' I conducted four focus-group discussions at a university in southeast China. This interview method is best able to gain understandings from "a shared fund of experiences" (Lindlof & Taylor 2011:183). Each group interview lasted from 2 to 2.5 hours with a total of 27 participants. The participants were female students majoring in foreign languages aged from 20 to 22 years. Although there is a risk that these groups might be homogeneous as young Chinese females, "argumentative interactions" in which divergent opinions were present were part of all group interviews (Lindlof & Taylor 2011: 184). In addition, the participants came from the northeast, southeast, and southwest of China (see Appendix). Such a wide range of backgrounds further stimulated the discussions.

A pre-interview guide that asked demographic and general questions, such as "Who are you?" was used to orient the group discussion. Grand-tour interview questions, such as "What does being Chinese mean to you?" asked participants to explain their perceptions of who counts as Chinese. Further, I asked participants to describe situations in which they had witnessed and experienced 'Chineseness' being negotiated. These questions were designed to gain insight into the sense-making processes regarding 'Chineseness' in cognitive, behavioral, and affective communication aspects.

Mandarin was used in the interviews with occasional English phrases from the participants. Being fluent in both languages, I later translated and transcribed these audio-taped interviews. Following Lofland and Lofland (1995) and Leslie (2010), I conducted initial and focused coding to discern commonalities. To ensure these categories were "grounded in, and responsive to, the local meanings in a scene" (Lindlof & Taylor 2010:248), I sought (1) repetitions of key words and phrases, (2) recurrences in which multiple parts in an interview shared the same meaning, and (3) forcefulness with emphases in interviews (Owen 1984:275). Interpretations of central concepts participants used to make sense of their experiences then emerged.

## Findings

'Chineseness' as a racial construct: "*Dashan is white and speaks Mandarin extremely well, but nobody will recognize him as a Chinese person.*"

The physical description of "yellow skin, black hair, and black pupils" was repeatedly used to define what a Chinese person is. For example, Alice from Hubei province explained, [2] "A Chinese needs to... bleed Chinese blood." Similarly, Tina from Hunan province specified the importance of having two biologically Chinese parents. Yen from Guangdong shared that she and her friend had had a brief encounter with a "handsome man who seemed to be a visitor" at the university. Both she and her friend were certain that he was of "mixed race between Chinese and something else... His eyes are especially charming, like those of foreigners. But we were not sure if he'd be considered Chinese." The biological features of the visitor's

eyes, a lighter color than their own, aroused a sense of admiration toward this racially unclassifiable man. His eyes further marked him as an outsider whose “‘Chineseness’ cannot be *felt*,” [3] according to Yen, by these university students. In that brief disorienting moment, Yen and her friend could not place the Chinese identity onto this distant body.

In all the interviews, the participants expressed that they would not consider someone to be Chinese who did not have a Chinese appearance even if this person grew up in China. Lynn from Guangdong shared an example of a recent national talent show in which a contestant was a “mixed-race person who has a Chinese mother and an African-American father.” People protested against this contestant’s legitimacy as “a real Chinese,” and most students agreed that it is a struggle to reconcile this visual dissonance. These statements underscore the importance of the untarnished “pure blood lineage” in the majority of Chinese people’s perceptions of ‘Chineseness’ (Leibold 2010:19).[4]

An intriguing difference between the emotional reactions to these two mixed-race individuals affords further attention. The visitor with admirable foreigner’s eyes was perceived as attractive, while the beauty contestant with an African-American father received disapproval. The term *foreigner* in Mandarin often suggests those with white skin (Cheng, 2008). The fact that the race of the contestant’s father was identified instead referring to the contestant with the general term *foreigner* shows the racial tone in such distinctions.

One is also reminded of the anti-African/Black sentiment in the late 1980s when racial conflicts started between African internationals and Chinese college students in Nanjing and Shanghai, which later led to many anti-African demonstrations on a larger national scale (Sautman 1994, Sullivan 1994). As Anante (2007) asserts, the fluidity of global circulation due to various mediated discourses dictates the environment in which individuals interact with members of other cultural/racial groups, as between Chinese and Africans. The contestant’s appearance represented a contact zone in which a Chinese body came into contact with a less desirable, darker skinned body. Emotions of negation and aversion were conjured by this association in which the power of historical legacy and hegemonic ideology popularized in public discourse was palpable.

From these interviews, it seems that the ability to identify a Chinese person relies heavily on visual discrimination. As Myra from Guangdong province shared:

*I have a friend who has darker skin... like people in Southeast Asia. So one day she put on a long skirt [similar to the Southeast Asian attire] and went to KFC. When the clerk was taking her order, my friend pretended that she didn’t understand the clerk. The clerk tried Mandarin, English, and Cantonese with my friend; she responded to none. She kept speaking some made-up gibberish. It was a very awkward situation. [Why did your friend do this?] Her dark skin tone has brought her many negative comments so she decided “To heck with it. So I am dark, then this is how I will act.”*

Through performing this prank, Myra’s friend showed resistance against being marked as a lesser Chinese. From her past experiences, people reacted negatively toward her body and connected it to a non-Chinese and less desirable racial identity. Her consequent performance showed an act of negation to articulations such as that assumed in those interactions. Furthermore, it has been well argued that darker skin pigment is associated with peasant and slavery status in Chinese societies (Dikötter 1992). Her pretending to be from Southeast Asia with an unintelligible dialect alluded to how racial construction intersects with class consciousness since the Chinese historically have held the dominant role in the region (Bolt 2011).

That said, the discourse on race has shifted since the 1950s to an anti-imperialistic belief in China’s role to lead the “exploited colored peoples” (Dikötter 1992:193) against Western domination. The sense of an unwanted proximity to a darker complexion was expressed in the above ambiguous performance in which her subversion ironically reinforced the existing hierarchy of race, class, and nation. By nullifying her darker skinned body of its ‘Chineseness’ her prank-like-performance suggested that lighter pigment legitimates the Chinese identity. It simultaneously relegated Southeast Asians into a space of unintelligibility, which in turn evoked an awkward feeling toward this foreign body as Myra described.

Yasmin from Fujian province mentioned a well-known entertainer from Canada named *Dashan* “big mountain” and explained that he is “white and speaks Mandarin extremely well but nobody will recognize him as Chinese.” The significance of blood lineage was stressed again in another group. Heidi from Hailongjiang province expressed:

*It is possible for, say, a Korean who speaks Chinese fluently... to be treated as Chinese but it will not be the same for a [white] European who looks drastically different from us... I do not think that in my lifetime will I see a person with that appearance being interacted with as if [she or he] is Chinese. (All participants nodded in agreement.)*

Phenotypic characteristics remain the deciding factor of these participants' image of being Chinese. Furthermore, the mutually exclusive appearance between the Europeans and the Chinese highlights the deeply seeded notion of the racial construction in ‘Chineseness’. Such a difference is treated as a “thing” that one inherently has and therefore is nearly impossible to dissolve. *Dashan*'s white skin and light hair color solicited greater emotional distance than that of a Korean's yellow skin and black hair, which is similar to ‘Chineseness’ in the interviewees' minds.

The rooted sense of biological determination and racial purity is ingrained in the “very *natural* reaction toward a person's appearance” as participants stated. Such an essentialized perspective risks homogenizing and fixating the diverse peoples of China. At the same time, such imagined similarity brings “a sense of safety” and “reduces a feeling of distance,” as several participants explained. It is an emotion of affinity—the participants attach themselves to someone who appears to share a visual sameness with them. Solidarity and identification are felt when the visual perception matches cognitive expectations, which releases a comforting collective consciousness of “she or he is one of us.”

‘Chineseness’ as a political performance: “*If you disagree that Taiwan...belongs to China, then we don't think you're Chinese, because you are not performing as a Chinese person would.*”

There are exceptions when even yellow skin, black hair and black irises do not grant ‘Chineseness’. In all discussions, participants focused on the interactive nature of cultural identity in which dialectical tensions between the avowed and ascribed perceptions collide (Martin & Nakayama 1999:1–25, Collier 1997:36–44).

Participants described emotions such as frustration, anger, and shame in their reactions to events of political misconduct committed by individuals from China. Being Chinese is seen as subscribing to the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. Nami from Guangdong stated that it is not enough for one to proclaim being Chinese; “The rest [of the Chinese people] also need to recognize [one] as Chinese.” She explained, “If [you were] a traitor or did something to bring shame to China, do you dare to say that you are Chinese?” Another example mentioned was the supporters of Falun Gong.<sup>[5]</sup> A participant asked me whether I had seen signs that say “天滅中共” (Heaven will extinguish the Chinese Communist Party) displayed by its supporters overseas. She said, “I was shocked after hearing my friend who studies abroad told me that.... How such a thing could be said! The education we received is that [Falun Gong] is a cult and harmful, and [its founder] Li Hongzhi is a disgrace to the Chinese people.” Others nodded while listening. Her confusion and hurt were palpable. The feeling of “losing an object: (i.e. the idealized nation) drew passion and love to protect against the “injury” caused by those (i.e. the critics) who attempt to take away that ideal (Ahmed 2004:125–133).

The sense of shared pride and duty to protect the national image was collectively shared in all discussions. As Yasmin expressed, “If you don't agree that Taiwan and the *Diaoyutai* [Senkaku/Pinnacle]<sup>[6]</sup> Islands belong to China, then we don't think you're Chinese, because you are not *performing like a Chinese would.*” ‘Chineseness’ is granted only to those who perform “like a Chinese person” who defends the nation's government. Criticizing Chinese governmental policies communicates one's dis-identification with the rest of the Chinese community and results in exclusion. These political events are arenas in which ‘Chineseness’ is viscerally experienced and embodied.

Tina from Hunan spoke about the controversial incident in 2005 in which South Korea claimed QuYuan, an important Chinese ancient figure, was Korean. She said, “[South] Korea found a historical book from who

knows where, and it says that Qu Yuan was Korean and also that the Chinese Mid-Autumn festival is one of their cultural activities.” Yen continued, “People were *very angry, very angry*... We felt that [the Koreans] were being deliberately provocative for no reason.” Tina went on, “[South Korea] changed the name of their capital [in 2005] from 漢城 (City of Han) to 首爾 (Shou Er). It’s like they wanted nothing to do with China [by ridding of the Sino-related word *Han*], and now they claim that both [Chinese] Qu Yuan and the Mid-Autumn festival are theirs. So it is very bizarre.”

These statements illustrate a feeling of being provoked and victimized. Such emotions caused by political events galvanized the collective “we-ness,” buttressed by the spirit to defend the Sino/Han people against “them,” the South Koreans who take “our” national and cultural possessions. As Ahmed (2004) stated, “Public matters are emotional, and emotions are public matters” (14). The participants expressed their feelings as social and cultural practices that simultaneously interact with international affairs. Their passions were derived from the imagination of a collective being threatened by “the other” (i.e., they, the Korean government, invaded our cultural activities). These participants experienced cultural and national identification through heightened affect. Their emotion echoes participant Yasmin’s assertion that culture and politics are inseparable. Such a boundary-creating feeling is an example of how “emotion binds the social body together” (Ahmed 2004:9).

Another such social event discussed in the interviews was a cyber political struggle nicknamed the “6.9.Holy War”. During the Shanghai 2010 World Expo, a stampede occurred made up of fans of Korean stars and event volunteers at the South Korean pavilion. Shirley from Guangdong explained that this event upset some people who “believe that those who admire Korean stars embarrassed China.” These people consequently called for a cyber war between the so-called “China lovers” and “those who are not,” such as fans of the Korean stars, starting on June 9 at 7 P.M., aiming to see which camp could freeze the Bai-Do’s server first.[7] This “either-or” logic propelled their zeal to demonstrate their devotion to the Chinese nation through active participation. Lanette from Heilongjiang province shared:

*I feel that the Chinese are really emotional when it comes to [nationalistic] events like this one. Like how when [South] Korea claimed that Changbai mountain [on the border of China and Korea] is their territory, people were furious. They denigrated the whole [Korean] nation and subconsciously disliked the Koreans. Meanwhile, the Japanese all of a sudden are no longer that lousy [as they have been viewed in China]. (laugh) It’s not really rational because it is all about politics. It is silly, but the emotional reactions were very strong. I remember I was angry and followed people’s slogan of “Boycott Korean products!” Then I saw my laptop is a [Korean-made] Samsung... How ironic.[It was] really an irrational and unpractical reaction. (laugh)*

Ceilia from Henbei province concluded:

*I think that the high level of tension between China, [South] Korea, and Japan lies in the prosperity of these countries. After all, the average living standards in Korea and Japan are still ahead of us. So even though, historically, they learned from our culture, we still suffer from low esteem. If we were strong like the United States, who would care what Japan or Korea did? We wouldn’t feel agitated at all.*

These discussions on the emotional expressions demarcated the self and other in a mentality of simultaneously being embarrassed and proud, angry and loving. The agonizing care for the nation was expressed by waging cyberwarfare against the Korean economy and its supporters as non-lovers of China. Meanwhile, as Ceilia analyzed, the sense of shame resulting from perceptions that Chinese socio-economic status is lower than those of Japan and Korea was transformed into an intense fervor that led to staging an online battle. Shao (2009) has pointed out the irony of the mismatch between the growth of China’s economy and its people’s low self-confidence. Such a condition has brewed conflicting emotions and led to the current study participants’ highlighting China’s glorious, historically advanced culture, which compensates for its low economic development. These students negotiated their deep-seated emotions by devoting their ultimate support to their government as a way to perform ‘Chineseness’. At the same time, they struggled to gain a multilayered understanding of their mixed emotions of “marginality, rootlessness, amnesia, anger, frustration, alienation, and helplessness” commonly experienced in the modern Chinese

collective sentiment (Tu 1994:vii). As Ahmed wrote, a declaration of shame can “bring ‘the nation’ into existence as a *felt* community” that defends against the wrong done to us (emphasis added; 2004:101).

‘Chineseness’ is performed through a “racial nationalism” in which the participants support Chinese national politics and protect the cultural property of the Sino/Han people. Ien Ang (2001) has explicated the dynamic and fluid processes that construct “ ‘Chineseness’ as a racial and ethnic category” and called attention to “the particular historical conditions...through which actual social subjects become incommensurably different *and* similar” (25). In these performances imbued with intense emotions and history, the lines between race, culture, and nation disappear and these concepts merge as one.

‘Chineseness’ as a proximity experience— “*Xinjiang and Tibet... are completely different.*”

Throughout the interviews, participants engaged in locating ‘Chineseness’ through (re)articulating immediate connections to the Middle Kingdom in the Central Plain of China. A sense of more or less attachment was then developed accordingly.

Alice from Hubei province described that the true East refers mainly to areas influenced by Confucianism, a culture developed in the Yellow River basin area. Annie from Yunnan explained that “Yellow River, *Huaxia* [China] or *Zhongyuan* [the China Central Plain] is where the Chinese people started.” All participants perceived this location, which was believed to be where the Han people resided, as the origin and foundation of the Chinese. In one group discussion, Yen expressed her feeling that she was not authentic Chinese.

*Maybe [because I received] an education in Cantonese [here in Guangdong],[8] which is different [from Mandarin], I am unfamiliar with the inland [Chinese] culture, which is closer to the [Chinese Communist] Party. I know more about daily life habits in and information about Hong Kong. I [feel] like I didn’t cultivate the rich Chinese traditions because sometimes I wonder if I am truly Chinese (laugh). For example, if someone in class mentions something in Beijing, those from Hebei [or] Henan provinces [closer to the China Central Plain] would know it, but it feels like such a remote and distant place to me. I don’t know enough to even hold a conversation.*

Tina, who was born in the north and relocated to Guangdong at a young age, continued:

*I [think] that is because Yen was born in Guangdong, which belongs to 嶺南地帶 (the Lingnan area);[9] we all know that a long time ago people from Zhongyuan viewed people from the Lingnan area as barbarians who lived in this uncivilized land and belonged to an underdeveloped stage. Nowadays, the business ambiance is more developed here [in the Lingnan area], and it is in contrast to that of the north [with greater culture]. I think this mentality still exists... only we hide this feeling well, and nobody shows it.*

In another group, Luna from Zhejiang province explained, “Guangdong is farther away from the capital city [Beijing] and culturally is influenced by Hong Kong and Macaw due to their proximity.” With its historical legacy juxtaposed with recent economic prosperity in the southern coastal cities, the Lingnan area has increased rifts between the nativist traditionalists and “urban industrial [and cosmopolitan] elites” (Zhao 2010:545) in terms of who represents the real Chinese.

Historically, Zhongyuan in the China Central Plain, has been treated as the Middle Kingdom occupied by the Han people who were perceived as “more civilized” and surrounded by “uncultured groups” (Dikötter 1992). The participants painted an ideal ‘Chineseness’ located in the central/northern part of China where the Chinese polity resides. Coupled with a sense of admiration and hope bestowed upon the east, this region then was envisioned as a pivotal space from which the sun rises. This imagined yet ubiquitously felt authentic ‘Chineseness’ is in the northeast where “the rich Chinese tradition,” in Yen’s words, is cultivated and embodied. Participants used descriptions such as “you can *feel* the differences” between people who are from the Central Plain and those who are not.

Alice described a Uyghur friend she met in her visit to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the far northwest and this friend's "adventurous spirit" that led her to camp out and hunt for a goat in her early teenage years. Alice expressed how she had trouble relating to her friend's "unthinkable" and "wild" behaviors because she felt they were incongruent with 'Chineseness', or rather Han-ness. In this rationale, her friend's lifestyle, different from hers as a Han person, was othered and exoticized as unrecognizable as Chinese.

At the same time, differences in biological appearance are minimized to maintain the nationalistic unifying ideology. Lanette from another group explained:

*Xinjiang and Tibet are different too. For example, in Tibet, I am not promoting its independence (softer voice), but they are completely different. Their diet, their dress, their lifestyle, nothing is even close to ours. Yes, we might have differences between the north and the south . [It] could be only that we prepare vegetables differently, but with them, it's totally, totally different . Their whole environment is different. Plus, they are so serious with their religion, and we don't have anything like that. They worship all the way up to the top at [Lhasa], but for us, it's just like another tourist spot. It almost feels like visiting another country.*

The Chinese government has strategically represented ethnic minorities by orchestrating these cultures in the public discourse, such as through televised programs to draw more tourism (Shein 1997, Zhang 2003). Alice stated that her friend belongs to an ethnic minority and a cultural group that is vastly different from hers, the majority Han group. The unknown and uncontrollable nature of the ethnic minorities was admired and distanced from simultaneously, like a tourist gazing at the Other. Through such a gaze, the Han majority remains the norm of 'Chineseness' to which other lifestyles and practices are compared, as Lanette explicated.

Racial components have been treated to solidify the Han race in differentiating from the "internal foreigners, [such as] the Manchus, Tibetans, and Mongols" (Gladney 2010:427). Gladney writes that "emphasizing the difference between Han and minorities helped to de-emphasize the differences within the Han community." Meanwhile, it also serves to distinguish the Chinese from the "external foreigners [such as] the Western and Japanese imperialists." Similarly, Schein has argued that, internally, racial and ethnic differences are exoticized to cater to foreign currencies (1997:69–98). From her fieldwork with the Miao people in Xijiang of the Guizhou province, Schein examined how minority Miao women in China are often gendered for and by the dominant Chinese discourse. Yet such differences are only limited to cultural aspects. My participants admitted that "the Chinese of Xinjiang look different from the Han people;" however, they stressed "the difference is very slight." When focusing only on cultural differences, such as attire, language, and dietary habits between the Han people and those who reside farther away from the Central Plain where the Han people originated, sameness and unity loom intact. The sense of a shared blood stream within the imagined ethno-nationhood remains possible for emotional and political attachment, regardless of apparent physical differences. The effort to minimize biological differences between themselves and those from Xinjiang is imperative because it coincides with the "racial blood" discourse to solidify the cohesive nationhood.

'Chineseness' is therefore an ambivalent positioning that is fluid and multilayered within the larger frame of socioeconomic and geopolitical relationships that draw boundaries between "sameness" and "differences" strategically (Gladney 1994:92–123). Such a process of inclusion and exclusion espouses emotions of and toward the "Other" (Ahmed 2004:1–19). By stressing the proximity to the Central Plain where Confucianism and the Han people originated, 'Chineseness' is then experienced somewhat coherently with various degrees of legitimacy. Tu, a Confucian scholar, wrote, " 'Chineseness' is always intertwined with and often inseparable from race, land, language, and faith" (1994:vi). The authenticity of 'Chineseness' is felt based on the cultural and geographic proximity to the central/northern region.

## Conclusions

This study illustrates how “emotions are relational” (Ahmed 2004:8) and are simultaneously created and creating through interactions to intensify a particular identity. In these interviews, ‘Chineseness’ was expressed and experienced racially, politically, and spatially, triggered by particular affections. There exist tensions between the personally experienced ‘Chineseness’ and attributions from an imagined Chinese collective bound by what Ahmed (2004) calls “sociality of emotions” where emotions come from outside into a person (9). Emotions such as “social presence” are effects that “work to generate the distinction between inside and outside, partly by rehearsing associations that are already in place” (Ahmed 2004:10, 195). An intertwined dance occurs for solidarity charged with intense passions toward race, culture, and nationhood in various realms of public discourse, and it is reformulated and reflected through the participants’ performing love toward the object of a collective Chinese.

Since the Opium Wars in the mid-1800s, the invention of a “nation–race” ideology that morphed from transnational racial discourses has been a catalyst to mobilize patriotism and promote a sense of collective responsibility in China (Dikötter 1992:124, Sullivan 1994). Contemporary constructions of the Chinese identity continue to be intimately and actively in interaction with racial, ethnic, and national relations in both the present and the past. With their affections, the participants constantly highlighted the procedural and relational activities members in the Chinese society (sub)consciously engage in, such as abstaining from Korean merchandise, denying those who disagree with the Chinese Communist Party, or rejecting the legitimacy of an African-Chinese person’s candidacy in a beauty pageant. These acts result in keeping a social order that benefits the established cultural and racial hierarchy. It is by excavating these temporal moments of *doing* ‘Chineseness’ that deeply felt emotions from cultural memories that historically glued together the believers in the Chinese racial nationalism are revealed.

This research unpacks the multifaceted layers in ‘Chineseness’ and questions the notion of its homogeneity. Even though all participants were female and in a rather privileged position as college students, their struggles in examining their experiences indicated tensions in the often-hegemonic understanding of a singular Chinese identity. A sense of ‘Chineseness’ centered on Han and the Central Plain was dialectically resurfaced and interrogated in these interviews. As Tu (1994) cautioned, “defining a Chinese as belonging to the Han race, being born in China proper, speaking Mandarin, and observing the ‘patriotic’ code of ethics may seem innocuous,” but such a simplified membership insidiously exercises more discrimination (vi). Through attending to the particular moments in which the multiple legitimacies of ‘Chineseness’ were experienced, the logic of a seemingly static identity constitution was foregrounded and challenged.

Finally, the implications of identity difference and sameness are to be understood within a specific location, as critical communication scholar Leda Cooks (2010) calls for works to “consider difference not as differentiations from a center but on its own terms.... [for] building alliances across cultures toward social change” (116). The current research does not claim that racial constructs in China are experienced and expressed in the same way as in the United States. On the contrary, I seek to provide a Chinese context to illustrate the diachronic impact of such identity work on relationship formation. Udayakumar (2011) has found that racially based ideology in the global, political, and cultural realms remains alive (82–92). It acts as a force to silence voices in many parts of the world outside the United States, and such ideology demands attention from scholarship on “internationalizing race” (Shome 2010:152). For example, Bhavnani and Davis (2000) distinguished how, unlike in the United States, racism in Europe is viewed as synonymous “with *xenophobia*” in that non-citizens encounter negativity from citizens (239). Instead of economic or ecclesiastical motives, nation building has been and remains the main influence in the Chinese racial consciousness. By connecting emotions expressed in these interviews about Chinese identity to historical and global discourses, this researcher hopes to negate the idea that certain concepts, such as race, are confined to a particular society. Rather, this study illustrates how racial discourses travelled in the past and continue being translated into contemporary daily relations in China. At the same time, this research shows how racial, ethnic, and cultural understandings inform affective and behavioral expressions of ‘Chineseness.’

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## Appendix

Name	Hometown
Alice	Hebei
Annie	Yunnan
Ceilia	Hebei
Heidi	Heilongjiang
Lanette	Heilongjiang
Luna	Zhejiang
Lynn	Guangdong
Myra	Guangdong
Nami	Guangdong
Tina	Hunan
Yasmin	Fujian
Yen	Guangdong



China Provinces Map. [online] Available at :  
<http://www.china-mike.com/china-travel-tips/tourist-maps/china-provinces-map/> [Accessed 10 October 2013].

## About the Author

Hsin-I Cheng (Ph.D. Bowling Green State University, 2006) is Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at Santa Clara University. Her research explores how multiple identities are intersected and negotiated in relation to border-crossing and neoliberal practices. She is the author of *Culturing Interface: Identity, Communication, and Chinese transnationalism*. Her research has appeared in *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, and *The Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication*.

### Author's Address

Hsin-I Cheng, Ph.D.  
 Department of Communication  
 Santa Clara University  
 500 El Camino Real  
 Santa Clara, CA 95053  
 Email: [hcheng2@scu.edu](mailto:hcheng2@scu.edu)

[1] For example, see Orbe and Drummond (2009) employed the lens of complicity theory to unpack how the U.S. tradition of categorizing race and ethnicity has shifted within its economic, political, and global forces. Historicized constructions of racialized groups point our attention to the linguistic workings of contemporary multiracial America. Halualani (2010) contextualized different outlooks of intercultural interaction influenced by particular historical and sociopolitical sediment. Martin, Trego, and Nakayama (2010) explored the process of racial categorization and interracial interactions in U.S. college environments. Orbe and Allen (2008) critically surveyed and analyzed the ways in which racial identity has been conceptualized and represented in applied research projects. They highlighted the significant impact of these conceptualizations on people's real lives. All these studies illustrate that racial/ethnic identity continues to be a pivotal factor in intercultural relationship formation and knowledge production.

[2] All names have been changed to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

[3] Statements added by me are put in []. Nonverbal expressions during the interviews are included in ( ), and words spoken with emphasis are italicized.

[4] Also see a critical autobiographical account by Wendy Thompson (2007) on her struggle to be recognized as Chinese by even her Chinese relatives because she had an African-American father and a Chinese mother.

[5] Falun Gong is a "grassroots movement that combines an exercise regimen with meditation and moral tenets" (Zheng 2011:1). It was founded in 1992 by Li Hongzhi through public lectures. In 1999, the Chinese Communist Party declared Falun Gong a

threat to society and banned information about it. The Chinese government's treatment of its practitioners has been a controversial issue raised by human right groups.

[6] The *Diaoyutai* Islands are a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea. The struggle over the ownership between Taiwan, China, and Japan began in 1971 when the United States "returned" the islands to Japan's control.

[7] This is the primary Internet search engine in China.

[8] This is a *lingua franca* in southern China including Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macaw.

[9] This refers to areas south of the Qinling Mountains, which divide China into north and south parts.