What makes “being Chinese” in San Francisco Chinatown? Discursive identity construction in first- and second-generation Chinese Americans

The Chinese American community in San Francisco was, and still is, shaped by migration, as it constitutes one of the oldest diasporas in North America. With a history dating back to the mid-19th century and thanks to ongoing immigration, the Chinese American community is highly stratified with regard to immigrant generation, with first-generation to sixth-generation Chinese Americans all living in one community. The focus of the present paper is on the first and second generation, as these groups have shown to be caught between the linguistic identity issues of heritage language maintenance and rapid language shift to the majority language.

Based on qualitative interview data of 28 first- and second-generation Chinese Americans collected during fieldwork in the ethnic enclave of Chinatown in the city centre of San Francisco, this paper discusses how participants construct and negotiate ethnic identity and belonging.

The following two research questions are at the centre of the analysis:

1. Which themes emerge as relevant for the construction of ethnic identity and belonging across the two immigrant generations?
2. What role does language (English, Cantonese, Mandarin) play with regard to ethnic identity construction?

Previous research into identity construction in ethnic communities has dealt with comparable questions and the present study substantiates their results. Studies on self-labelling practices (e.g., Kiang et al. 2011; Talbot 2008) have shown that choosing a label is influenced by factors such as generational status, phenotype, social network or, as Kiang et al. (2011: 722) state “by identity work involved in maintaining close ties to one’s ethnic background.” As the present study shows, similar factors have influenced label choice in the Chinese American community investigated here. Language competence, as illustrated by e.g. Li and Zhu (2010) and Duff (2014), is closely linked with Chineness, a finding that is echoed in the present study and illustrated in example 4) below. And finally, practiced or symbolic transnationalism can affect both linguistic practices (Sharma 2014), as well as sense of belonging (Louie 2006).

For the present study, content coding of the transcribed, semi-structured sociolinguistic interview data showed several emergent themes, comparable to the ones introduced above, to be relevant to identity: self-labelling, Chinatown (as a space), linguistic practices, and transnational ties to the country of origin. Examples 1) to 5) illustrate some of the participants’ attitudes towards those issues:

1) I just say Chinese American why go around the circle just Chinese American, I’m proud to be Chinese American (Bob, Gen2Y, Interview)
2) Yeah there’re are a lot of times cos then people I guess they have this mentality that oh just cos you’re Chinese you probably won’t know how to speak English so then when they talk to me and then I actually you know I use like bigger words or I actually use you know pronunciations they get surprised cos they’re like wow you actually know English (Wesley, Gen2Y, Interview)
3) *it was fun growing up in Chinatown* because it was a smaller community then (...) well I still feel my roots are in Chinatown even though I moved out of the area so I come back every weekend to this community I still feel strong ties to the community, I identify with it (Carrie, Gen2O, Interview)

4) *When I can speak Chinese in a way that it seems like I’m just blending in with the crowd* then I kind of have to say to myself *I’m kind of proud of my ability to speak Chinese* proud of the fact that I had this upbringing where I learned to speak Chinese and (...) I can say I’m Chinese (Eric, Gen2O, Interview)

5) I did yes kind of a roots trip I was getting very interested in my heritage at that point (...) uhmm yes I’ve been back (...) I definitely felt a connection it made me understand my parents’ situation better and made me understand their family history and background and their life uhmm much better (Enid, Gen2O, Interview)

The present study thus aims to describe how first- and second-generation Chinese Americans draw on the aforementioned themes to negotiate their Chineseness and Americanness and shows that language is one of the key factors in identity construction. While the features introduced above “are not a check-list of ‘necessary’ alternative signifiers of ‘Chinese culture’” (Francis et al. 2014: 214) or Chinese (American) identity, they are valuable sources allowing participants to position themselves as members of both their heritage as well as the mainstream community.

References:


