

Identity and Politics: Reflections of a Diasporic Hybrid*

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Privilege— A Child Living in Macau

I was born with this privilege, I was a colonial child.

I was needed as a pack animal by my relatives in China.

Mainland Chinese looked at my colourful dress with envy.

I was cherished in my birthplace Macau; at least my needs were met.

Two years after my birth, The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) began in mainland China. Two of my mother's sisters and one uncle, all born in Macau with upper-class privileges, had been sent to China as teenagers by my rich grandfather for tertiary education because these institutions did not exist in Macau at that time. Hidden enemies in the party and intellectual circles had to be identified and silenced. Conceived of as a 'revolution to touch people's souls,' the aim of the Cultural Revolution was to attack the Four Olds— old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits— everything had to change. Anything that was suspected of being feudal or bourgeois had to be destroyed. Being trapped, my two aunts and uncle made the best of their situation, married and had children. My two aunts' families lived in southern Guangzhou; my uncle's family resided in Harbin, in the far northeast of China. For them, everyday necessities were always shared and often in short supply. My mother used to take me and my older brother on an overnight boat trip to Guangzhou every few months to visit her siblings. The main reason we went was to transport large amounts of

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food, textiles, sewing supplies, and medicine to my relatives. My mum also missed her sisters. The Communist government turned a blind eye and permitted people from Portuguese Macau to take supplies into the mainland. Dragging heavy sacks, we joined this convoy – every one of us was a pack animal 人肉貨車 (human lorry), even six-year-old me. I gradually realised how lucky my life was. In mainland China you could only buy food with official 糧票 (food vouchers). My relatives struggled to hoard enough vouchers for us to use when visited. They had a laying hen in a basketwork cage in their front courtyard. You could not avoid the noisy chicken, so my cousins and I made it our pet; we loved that chicken.

One day the chicken was gone. That evening I worked out where it had gone. Our pet had turned into a meal on the wooden family dining table. I was eating its wing. I cried and so did my mother, but I later realised that she cried because she knew that her sisters' families would go hungry for a long time. My mum held tight her hurt about what her siblings endured. Many years later she explained it all to me. Their families didn't have what we had in Macau. My grandparents were rich.

My uncle and aunts never knew hardship until they were caught in the Cultural Revolution. They were marched away from their homes and sent to mountains and villages for re-education. They became farm labourers. When I visited, the Communist flag was everywhere, everyone looked alike in grey or navy blue with the same hair-cuts; everyone quoted Chairman Mao. The small grey rectangular paper food vouchers were very different from the multi-coloured paper money we used at home. Without these little bits of grey paper, my family couldn't get food. What food they did have was supplemented by their meagre supply of eggs until we ate the chicken. My mum told me that my cousins would have little food left because we had been there. I thought that was all my fault.

Years later I was still travelling back and forth to China carrying goods. My whole family had moved to Australia and I went along. In 1985, I was twenty-one and China had changed. The Cultural Revolution had ended and my relatives weren't poor anymore – they had plenty of chickens. I still had foreign papers and could get in and out of China with stuff. My family commissioned me to be a lorry again. This time I brought a refrigerator, a coloured television and small electric appliances. Once I got them into Guangzhou, my Chinese relatives forwarded the goods that I carried to my uncle in Harbin, where life was really tough. This was my last job as a human lorry.

Thirty years later, as a tourist, I took a holiday and visited Harbin. I stayed in a hotel where the indoor temperature was 23 Celsius; outside at night it reached 14 below. Everything in modern China was different. Once I had felt I was a rich and privileged guest, but the tables had turned. The Chinese currency *Yuan* (人民幣 *RenMinBi* [RMB]) was stronger than Macau dollars. Former colonial citizens like me were expected to worship RMB and kowtow to mainlanders.

The world was simple when I was six. I followed my mum on a 'holiday' (not really) to see my family in the mainland. As soon as we got there I felt something was not quite right. I had bright dresses and toys at home. My cousins' house had no toys, they only had a harmonica and had to learn the Red-Mao songs. We made the best of what we had and played with the chicken— a novelty for me. On that visit my unthinking self gradually worked out that I had more than they did. That was OK until we ate the chicken. Suddenly I could taste reality. I looked around and saw their lives – grey, controlled and lacking everything I loved. I could not imagine them having fun.



Original Sin— Meeting Chinese in Melbourne

I was born with this sin, an original sin.

*I was not treated as a genuine Chinese
by the mainlanders in Australia.*

*People listened to my Cantonese accent
and walked away.*

*I was humiliated by my own people;
at least I thought they were.*

[Flinders Street Station, Melbourne, Australia]

In 1980 when I was fifteen, I moved to Australia with my family for better education.

Original Sin reflects my pain and yearning to be placed somewhere else because my Chinese roots were denied by mainland Chinese I met when I first settled in Melbourne. If I looked through the eyes of the mainland Chinese, I was something different, not matching their understanding of what it is to be Chinese. Whenever I spent time with mainland Chinese in Australia I was seen as a virtual foreigner. I was overwhelmingly too (non-white) Australian to be Chinese because I spoke English and did not understand Mandarin. I felt like I was a disappointment to them, which made me feel insignificant, inadequate and different — hybridity brought shame to me. With my Chinese face, I was not surprised by discriminatory remarks from white Australians; I was prepared for that. But being rejected by my own people was destructive and crippling to my sense of self. I was the ‘other *Chinese*’, belonging nowhere.

When I was a child, my family and I spoke Cantonese and lived in a Spanish-style villa in Macau. A few doors down were the headquarters for the Portuguese soldiers and every day they marched up and down my street yelling Portuguese words. Even though I grew up with them, they were foreign to me. Being born in Macau I was surrounded by Portuguese life but knew I was not that. When I went to mainland China, I did not feel that I was one of them — either Chinese or Portuguese. I felt like a placeless orphan who did not belong. I had been learning English since I first went to school. When I found out that we were moving to Australia, I thought that my English would be a way to connect with this new culture. I was shocked when I arrived to realise that in multicultural Australia I was expected to maintain and celebrate my own cultural heritage. That was fine until I discovered that the predominant Chinese cultural in-group all spoke Mandarin. So I was not ‘Chinese enough’ in their eyes, I was an outcast.

After we moved to Melbourne, I felt homesick and often spent time examining my travel documents because I missed Macau. I sat on my bed and spread out all the documents that defined me. I looked at my pink coloured Chinese identity card. It was issued by the Chinese-Portuguese colonial government; but I could only recognise my photo and my signature in handwritten Chinese characters.

I was also issued with a Portuguese CI ‘*passaporte para estrangeiros*’ — a passport for foreigners which was not a Portuguese passport that allowed me to live in Portugal. Comparing this pink card with my mint coloured Portuguese CI which I was given to travel to Australia, I realised I was truly a cultural hybrid. My documents confirmed this. Why was I

given important papers about myself that I couldn't understand? Symbolically, my Chinese handwriting was positioned among Portuguese (an unknown language). Physically, I was relocated to Melbourne (an unknown territory) as a minor without the ability to make the decision on my own. I was uprooted from familiar surroundings with school and church mates, and a romantic relationship that I had invested my energy and time to cultivate. I was intensely lonely and lost like a stray dog. I was in Melbourne—a hellhole to me at that time—a vast land with grey sky, countless trees, and perhaps more sheep than people. Where were the overcrowded hawker markets of home? The Melbourne CBD is always lit by colourful lights (see photo of the central train station at Flinders Street) but the suburban streets were dead and silent with few street-lights on after dark. I could hear my own breath inside my room, echoing from the walls.

Macau and Hong Kong people were nick-named by the mainlanders as 殖民地孤兒 (colonial orphans). Before and after the rule of the colonial governments, people who were born in Macau and Hong Kong could not travel to China unless they applied to have a 回鄉証 (Return Home Card). I have one and, of course, the implication is that I have no home. To cross the border, I need that Return Home Card to take me back to my 'national' home—mainland China. The dilemma continues. People from the former British and Portuguese colonies could never get a Chinese national passport, which has a burgundy red cover with five stars replicating the red Chinese national flag. On the other hand, the colonial governments made it hard for their citizens to get Portuguese/British passports because they also wanted to silently deny our rights to migrate and reside in their countries. I was issued with the mint coloured CI to travel abroad. I continued to use this CI for some years before I was eligible to apply for Australian citizenship. I know some friends who struggled over whether to give up their original citizenships before they could become Australians. Emotionally, it was like cutting the umbilical cord from the womb that nurtured their growth, and it detached them from their family legacy. I had no such struggle because I was never given an affirmative national identity. Neither Macau nor China ever gave me a passport. I was at the mercy of the Australian government that authorised my right to exist, reside, and thrive (or not) in their country. Australia allowed me to naturalise; I decided that this meant that Australia 'wanted' me. I felt that being wanted meant that my existence must be somewhat useful to this country; although I had not really thought about it deeply as a teenager at the time that I swore my allegiance to Australia. Today, I see myself as a responsible citizen, contributing positively to this country through my work. I guess if I were to apply to come to Australia as an older immigrant now, Australia might not be too welcoming because I could be a burden to their health and welfare systems.

The ambiguity of my identity affected my sense of being and made me wonder about the issue of authenticity. I have different travel papers but only one passport. I look at my mint CI and know that Portugal didn't 'want' me. I look at my Return Home Card and it confirms that China didn't 'want' me, either. I hold my navy blue Australian passport with its kangaroo and emu on the cover, realising that I never grew up here but here I am 'wanted' because I have a passport to prove it. I consider myself Chinese in every sense of my being. But I felt so out of place when I travelled with my mum to Guangzhou to visit my extended families as a child. My relatives were different from me. I asked myself, "Were they more Chinese than I was?" They were oppressed during the Cultural Revolution; and I felt I was oppressed being born in a colony. Over my lifetime, I continue to struggle with the privilege of enjoying a comfortable life in Macau and Australia, as well as being disadvantaged and displaced as a diasporic hybrid. Anglo-Australians view me as an ethnic minority within the mainstream society because of my appearance and accent. My perceived insecurity is that I

would only be good at being a teacher of TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language), although I was initially trained as a psychotherapist. I found only Caucasian teachers teaching English and English Literature in Australian schools. The Australian Psychological Society is also dominated by white practitioners.

In 2009, I applied for a psychology and English teaching position in a high school; during the interview the principal asked if I would be prepared to teach Mandarin, assuming that a Chinese woman could fill in to teach Chinese in emergency situations. He also said there was a small group of Chinese students who needed remedial English and could benefit from my after-school tutoring. Was it my Chinese face that prompted these irrelevant questions? I was there to interview for a classroom English and psychology teacher position; I was not taken seriously either as an English teacher, or as a psychology teacher. I took it as an insult to my teacher training from the top education faculty in Australia where I completed graduate studies. White supremacy, racism, and discrimination are not my neurotic fantasies or paranoia, but they manifested subtly here.

My diasporic hybridity continues to prevent me from achieving a feeling of wholeness because I constantly have to negotiate my identities to seek recognition from others. Since the linguistic marker 'Mandarin' defines me as a genuine Chinese in the eyes of the mainland Chinese I met in Australia, I was led to believe that speaking Mandarin would assist me in being part of the majority cultural group of Chinese in Australia. When I lived in a residential college at Melbourne University, to which the upper-middle class could afford to send their children, I could not find many people who looked like me. I felt so miserable that 'I was not Australian enough to be Australian; I was not Chinese enough to be Chinese'. I endured the racial taunts from people calling me 'banana' (yellow outside, white inside), and pretended I was 'white'—one of them. But my eyes did not turn blue, my skin was still yellow. I put up a good appearance outside, but I was lost inside. In a white-majority place, I was forced to identify with my Chineseness. Eventually, this prompted me to dig deeper into my racial, ethnic, and cultural roots, and keen to reclaim my Chinese identity.

White Australians have a tendency to assume that everyone who looks Chinese knows the version of mainland Chineseness that is displayed to tourists. It was assumed that I knew and preserved my cultural heritage, and that I spoke the official Chinese language. So I studied Chinese language and literature. I also wanted to be able to communicate with mainland Chinese in their own language. Apart from making me feel the raw pain of 'not fully reaching either end' of Chinese or Australian culture, my in-between-ness motivated me to become an English teacher.

In November 2010, I was sponsored by the Australian government to attend Mandarin language teacher training in China. On the night of departure in Melbourne Airport, I was denied exit to Beijing because the immigration officers said I did not apply for a Chinese Visa to enter China. I explained to them that my Return Home Card gave me the right to enter any part of China as a citizen of Macau, and I could stay there for up to six months. I was told by them repeatedly that I would be 'kicked out by the Chinese government on arrival' – as if I was too dumb to comprehend their message the first time they delivered it in the course of that hour. I was frustrated, tired, thirsty, and getting nowhere. My fatigue won. I gave up and took a taxi home. The next morning, I rushed to the Chinese Embassy to get a visa. I had to rebook my flight and it cost me \$600 more. Having done multiple border crossings from Macau to China in the role of a human lorry, I knew that I could not have been deported in Beijing by Chinese immigration officials. So I thought of a revenge plan on my re-booked flight: I would not show my newly issued Chinese Visa at customs but use my Return Home Card to enter China. On return to Australia, I would write a complaint letter about my

mistreatment at the airport, by using a blank Visa page without stamp as evidence for my appeal. Of course, everything went as I had planned, except that when I came back, I was busy at work and other everyday life tasks, so I didn't write the letter immediately. The lack of spare time prevented me from protesting any further. I decided if I let it go, I could at least have my sanity back.

Respect— Revisiting China

I was studied by the mainland Chinese,

I was a scholar.

*I was admired by educated Chinese
at Confucius Temple in the Holy City.*

*People were surprised that I decoded
an ancient Chinese character.*

*I was respected by my own people;
at least I believed they did.*

[The Confucius Tree planted by Confucius in 500
BC, Confucius Temple, Qu Fu, China]



I earned ***Respect*** when I crossed the Australian border and revisited China as a scholar. In September 2013, I went to China to conduct field research about Chinese cultural roots in Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) and attended the Sixth World Confucius Conference in Qu Fu—the Holy City, Confucius's birth place. On the day of Confucius's 2564th birthday celebration, I was among the official guests at the Commemoration Ceremony at Confucius Temple. The guests for that day were meticulously classified by the official party according to their class, social status, and occupations before being directed into Standing Areas A to G, covering different grounds within the temple. The most honourable international guests were political representatives from other countries, Chinese officials from the Confucius's Institute and other government organisations, as well as foreign scholars who were attending the conference. This group of attendees sat at the highest part of the temple. Having a Chinese face and being a doctoral student of CHC, I was separated from this group and put in Area A, which was only one class lower than the most select group. Incidentally, the Israeli student researcher whom I met at the conference and who was studying at a Chinese university had a more foreign face, and was able to sit with the first group of guests. I was enraged by this discriminatory treatment, but my protest had no effect on the guards.

While we were waiting for the official party to march into the main temple, all guests were given time to study the program and invited to recite the poems. There were many ancient characters printed on the program. Knowing that all Area A attendees were also important people, I assumed they were well educated. Suddenly someone on my right asked while pointing at his program, 'What is this character?' Everyone paid attention to him because there was nothing going on; we were bored because of the waiting. However, no one surrounding him provided an answer. This ancient character had many strokes, and no one

dared to guess the answer. In order to perhaps avoid embarrassment, everyone kept their silence.

Miraculously, I happened to know that word from my childhood. I said it aloud in my mother tongue Cantonese, then I explained the word to strangers surrounding me in context in Mandarin. Cantonese, a 1,300-year-old language, is a much older language than the 500-year-old Mandarin. Cantonese uses full character forms; Mandarin uses simplified forms; some things got lost along the way. People around me literally turned toward me and gazed steadily at my face – a gesture of respect. Trapped in that moment as in a time capsule, the spectator became the spectacle. As a visitor, I broke the rule of silence and brought cultural disruption to the serious, intense atmosphere. Chinese familial and societal structures are organised in a continuum by a hierarchical kinship system where the young respect, honour and care for the old, based on the principle of 孝 (filial piety). Characterised by collectivism, the needs of the group are placed above those of the individual. My immodest act of making my own voice heard in an international ceremony which was a collective celebration of Confucius's birthday could be seen as disrespectful to authority, and a sleight to my CHC training. Slowly, they began to enquire about my work and my country of permanent residency because of my obvious tourist appearance. I told them I was a researcher of Confucianism from Australia. Someone remarked, 'Oh, good! You are a professor of Chinese language and culture from Australia.' I allowed them to indulge me with such a fancy title for a minute before I had the chance to clarify everything. At that moment, I found Chineseness in me in Qu Fu on Confucius's birthday—I am a genuine 龍的傳人 (Dragon's Child) – a true descendant of the Heavenly dragon. My Chinese identity emerged and was enacted communicatively during such brief social encounters. My role as a researcher of Confucianism cultivated a symbol of status that demanded respect in that particular context. My ability to decode a very difficult ancient word earned me the respect I yearned for from the mainlanders. I felt liberated from my own bondage and perceived discrimination. My performative self bridged my broken relationship with the mainland Chinese. I translated their respectful gaze into an act of empowerment. I knew something 'Chinese' that they didn't and I found a suture for my pain. When I interacted with mainland Chinese in Melbourne thirty-five years ago, I felt marginalised and not worth noticing—transparent, 'seen but not *seen*'. All because I did not speak their language; I was an outsider, an odd one among them. Finally, I reclaimed my Chinese heritage in what was for me the best place on earth—the Confucius Temple in the Holy City. This respectful gaze triumphed over all the loss and inferiority I felt since I was a teenager, as well as the momentary anger and rejection I experienced when I was forced into Standing Area A in the temple.



Confrontation— Researching in Bendigo

I was welcomed by the Bendigo Chinese,

I was a researcher.

I was treated with a great Chinese meal cooked by the father.

They did not speak Chinese,

but behaved more Chinese than I did.

*I was confronted by my understanding of Chineseness;
at least momentary.*

[Municipal Council, Bendigo Town Hall, Bendigo, Australia]

In 2014, my Australian colleague and I interviewed a father and daughter in Bendigo. Going to Bendigo to conduct the interview provided me with the opportunity to stretch my Chinese racialised body in further, unanticipated ways. The Bendigo Chinese-Australian community is unique because Bendigo is a small provincial city; geographically located about one and a half hours' drive away from Melbourne. The ancestors of this ethnic group were the early mine workers from Guangzhou and their neighbouring villages. For generations, Bendigo people had great respect for the Chinese community because it was historically the Chinese who supported most of the charity works in that city ever since the days of the Gold Rush. The local Australians there slowly assimilated the traditional Chinese culture. They collectively participate in the annual Chinese New Year festivals, the unique Easter Fair, and being the main players in the Dragon and Lion Dance groups. During this trip, I was confronted by a new form of Chineseness, which I would term 'Westernised Chineseness', where the focus was no longer on linguistic competency, but on heritage maintenance and cultural transmission. The father recalled that he was forced to lose his mother tongue when he was a child, but he spoke Chinese with his grandparents who did not understand English. In the old days in Australia, his family would have been penalised if they did not take on a Westernised surname; so they adopted an Anglo family name. The father said that his late Australian wife with blue eyes did not speak Chinese, but she had had a 'Chinese heart' and had been actively involved in charity work for the Chinese-Australian community. As a Chinese-Australian migrant researcher, I had had to come to terms with my own identity as a diasporic hybrid, having been situated – sometimes painfully – in multiple socio-political contexts. I felt an innate desire to want to know who I was, am, and may become.

Something happened on that day of my visit that I could never forget because I was confronted with the question I had long asked myself, 'Are they more Chinese than I?' In traditional Chinese culture, if the guests are in the host's territory over lunch time, the host is obliged to invite the guests to stay for a meal. In Western culture, this can also happen as a result of kindness of the host, but it is not an obligation. At lunch time, we were served with duck, barbecue roast pork, and stir fry vegetables on rice with chopsticks. In the process of acculturation, I had long ago adopted a more Westernised diet. I seldom eat rice, and I only

use chopsticks when I eat out in a Chinese restaurant. Knowing that the father cooked the meals out of respect for us, we repaid him by emptying all plates.

What intrigued us was that we were informed when we arrived that lunch would be served; we had no need to go out for a meal. What puzzled us further was in the socially acceptable Western way, we would be consulted if we preferred to stay for lunch instead. To them, it was an obligation to treat us to lunch like the majority of Chinese would. And to honour us as an important guests, the father became the chef for the day. I was confronted in my own understanding of Chineseness, and felt that they were even more Chinese than I although none spoke any Chinese. They carry their cultural heritage by actively promoting the learning and teaching of Chinese culture in their community, as well as serving at their local council and various clubs and societies.

Confrontation captures my experience encountering the Bendigo Chinese. They had presented me with a new meaning of Chineseness, which is eclectic and inclusive, not confined by the linguistic and physical markers that had plagued my own youth. This Westernised Chineseness is well appreciated and practised by mainstream Australians. Here, I crossed my mental border of what defined 'Chineseness'. I reconnected my own Chineseness with reference to 'other Chineseness', and gained a different appreciation of my and others' Chineseness. My presumption of what defined Chineseness altered when I was confronted with new behaviours and symbolism. I began to understand my identity in a contextual frame with larger boundaries. My life was ruled by borders that defined me and restricted my movement, but they did not contain me. In Portuguese Macau, I was not Portuguese. In mainland China, I was not Chinese. Even in Australia, I was/am not Australian. Now, my Chinese identity and that of others who claim to possess Chineseness, is more mobile because we do not all share the same distinctive visible and linguistic markers. Moving to and maturing in Australia allowed me to navigate through the multicultural landscape; I witnessed my identities always changing, emerging, and constantly in negotiation. Today, when I sit on my sofa *at home* contemplating the trajectory of my life, I laugh at myself as I imagine the pack animal (human lorry) I was, just for old time's sake, even when my performance is no longer required by my relatives in mainland China — my (presumed, denied, and reconnected) motherland.