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Being Chinese or Being Different: Chinese Undergraduates' Use of Discourses of Chineseness

Abstract Myths about “the Chinese learner” developed from an outsider perspective abound in the Western world. The focus of this article, however, is how discourses of Chineseness were used by the Chinese international students themselves who, as undergraduate students in a New Zealand university, were the subjects of my doctoral research. It examines the students' notions of Chineseness and how these served in explaining their own narratives, either through identifying with, or distancing themselves from, “Chinese” traits, indicating alternatively a shared experience of the challenges of the new academic culture, or marking themselves out as having a special ability to thrive within it. Whichever way they used them, the discourses seemed to serve a purpose of fortifying their sense of identity and membership. By the end of their study, they were able to reflect carefully on their experiences and discuss new third space identities in which both Chinese and New Zealand values were forging new realities for them.

Keywords Chinese undergraduate, Chinese identity, negotiation of identity

Introduction

Chinese students have long been the subject of the myth that arises when outsiders make sweeping assumptions about different cultures. The literature reports widely on the attribution of essentializing characteristics, often negative from the point of view of the attributor, to this group. These include an over-reliance on rote memory and surface learning strategies, a high achievement in numeracy but an inability to think critically, and the adoption of passive and dependent learner roles (e.g., Biggs, 1996; Clark & Gieve, 2006; Gieve & Clark,

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2005; Ryan, 2013; Yuan & Xie, 2013). These have often been swept up into a homogenizing use of the singular in referring to “the Chinese learner,” even by those who seek to question the misconceptions (e.g., Watkins & Biggs, 1996), as if there was only one way that Chinese students exist as learners. From this perspective, as Rose Clark and Simon Gieve (2006, p. 57) point out, “a Chinese learner is always and only a Chinese learner.”

Any unitary delineation of people according to national or ethnic origins, which Adrian Holliday (1999) refers to as a “large culture” approach, will always be to some degree mythical. The contexts in which their earliest education takes place may provide certain types of experiences which lead students initially to particular expectations and responses in new educational contexts. However, making deterministic predictions of future behavior or attempting to explain fully any individual’s trajectory based on assumptions of uniform responses limits awareness of subtleties, fails to take into account myriad other influences and personal differences, and leads to stereotyping (Clark & Gieve, 2006; Ryan, 2013).

Work from a more emic perspective, such as that of Lixian Jin and Martin Cortazzi (e.g., Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006) and many others (e.g., Chang & Strauss, 2010; Clark & Gieve, 2006; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Parris-Kidd & Barnett, 2011; Zhao & Bourne, 2011), has far better reflected my experience of teaching such learners in both New Zealand and China, offering access to more complex realities beneath the surface. These perspectives allow not just for the concept of individual difference to enter into accounts of learners from China, but even the question of “whether individuals necessarily feel themselves to ‘be Chinese’ wholly, irrevocably and consistently” (Gieve & Clark, 2005, p. 264). Gieve and Clark suggest an important question is not just “*how being ‘Chinese’ affects me*, but also *how ‘Chinese’ do I feel I want to be at any time*” (original emphasis, p. 264).

It was this question of how “Chinese” they chose to present themselves as at different points that emerged from interviews I held, as part of my doctoral research into the experiences of Chinese international undergraduate students from the People’s Republic of China in a New Zealand university, which inspired this article. My interest was in how the students called on their own understandings of what it meant to be Chinese in making sense of their experiences and in representing themselves to me in the interviews we had

together. This proved to be part of a fluid and multilayered process of considering and presenting themselves in relation to their New Zealand contexts. Sometimes they aligned themselves with the “we” of Chinese learners, but at other times they consciously marked themselves off as “other.” During the trajectory of the longitudinal part of my research project, I was able to see their understanding of what it meant to them to be Chinese deepen, at the same time as they began to find themselves drawn towards some contrasting values they saw in their observations of New Zealand society, providing for complex identities which called on aspects of both cultural contexts in a third space (Singh & Doherty, 2004).

Negotiation of Identities in Unsettling Spaces

In investigating this fluidity, the perspectives that I have drawn on as most useful include issues of membership and issues of positioning and the negotiation of identity.

Issues of membership draw on Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s work (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) in relation to communities of practice. The university displays the characteristics of a community of practice, since it involves participants in “dense relations of mutual engagement organized around what they are there to do” (Wenger, 1998, p. 74), operating over a time span sufficient to allow participants to develop “shared histories of learning” (p. 86). As is typical of such communities, it involves complex networks of relationships, roles, identities, language use, and behavior deemed to be appropriate, but induction into these is often not made explicit. Acquiring the practices of such a community ideally occurs through a process of participation alongside supportive old-timers who “open” its practice, but a new entrant can be made to feel marginalized, ill at ease and excluded if their peripheral position as an uninitiated newcomer appears not to be treated as legitimate:

As a place in which one moves toward more-intensive participation, peripherality is an empowering position. As a place in which one is kept from participating more fully—often legitimately, from the broader perspective of society at large—it is a disempowering position. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 36)

Moving towards more centralized participation can bring a sense of

membership of a community of practice, but there are times when that does not occur. For example, a New Zealand university may provide many inductive practices for newly enrolled local students whose educational preparation has taken place within the same academic culture, whom Gee (2004) refers to as “false beginners.” However, these may not be accessible to “authentic beginners” such as international students who have been differently prepared and may be impervious to the often subtle signs provided to guide the kind of actions which are deemed acceptable. It may take a considerable time therefore before they can feel they are operating as members: “in practice, we know who we are by what is familiar, understandable, usable, negotiable; we know who we are not by what is foreign, opaque, unwieldy, unproductive” (Wenger, 1998, p. 153). Under such circumstances of uncomfortable exclusion from one community, ways of claiming membership of other available groups, such as co-nationals, must be seen as appealing.

The process of achieving membership of a new community of practice inevitably “involves the construction of identities” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53) as new behaviors and ways of being are appropriated to allow one to operate within the institution: “the process of engaging in practice always involves the whole person, both acting and knowing at once” (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). Norton (2000) defines identity as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 5). Obviously, entering a university which operates in a different language and with a very different academic culture demands important changes in understandings of these relationships. There may be an unsettling sense of disconnect with identities available in the past: “as social actors in a new cultural and linguistic environment, language learners find themselves at a great disadvantage to construct a real self that approximates the ideal they uphold” (Aveni Pelle grino, 2005, p. 148). Others, too, have shown the complexities of negotiating identity in multilingual spaces (e.g., Kinginger, 2004; Miller, 2003), in English-medium universities (e.g., Chang & Strauss, 2010; Marshall, 2010; Morita, 2004) and as globalized Chinese (Meerwald, 2001). In general, the subjects of these studies experience fluid and situated identities, some of them quite disempowered, which result in evolving and sometimes conflicting responses, and this was certainly the case in my study.

The concept of the *negotiation* of identities and the salience of *relationship* in Norton's description above emphasizes that identity is anything but solipsistic. It is intensely susceptible to affordances offered or withheld by other people with power in any context. People's sense of self is strongly influenced by how others position them, for example, through the use of stereotyping discourses of "the Chinese learner." However, where this does not accord with the subject's aspired-to identity, the possibility of negotiation may be available. Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge (2004), drawing on the work of Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990), suggest that in certain circumstances, attempts to impose an identity can be resisted, bringing about an "interplay between reflective positioning, i.e., self-representation, and interactive positioning, whereby others attempt to position or reposition particular individuals or groups" (p. 20). Their "dynamic view of identities, with individuals continuously involved in production of selves, positioning of others, revision of identity narratives, and creation of new ones which valorize new modes of being and belonging" (p. 19) is one that I find useful in explaining much of the data discussed in this article.

Where the negotiation occurs across regions of the globe, the personal meaning of one's own ethnicity is one of the elements that that may shift. In examining the experience of Chinese migrant women in Australia, Meerwald (2001, p. 402) refers to this fluid, situated state as *liminality*, suggesting that it allows the production of an ethnicity that is "new without erasing the traces of the past, but the past is acknowledged as it is woven into the present to create a familiar newness in how Chineseness is practised." The extended research interview provides multilayered opportunities for this identity work, as interviewees recount encounters with the other people who constitute their context, relive, reflect on and re-interpret moments of significance and make choices about how they present themselves to an intensely interested and attentive listener.

Expectations, Emerging Issues, and Change for Chinese International Students in a New Zealand University: The Study

The doctoral research project with the above title from which this data is drawn was a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews from a sociocultural

viewpoint to investigate the experiences of undergraduate Chinese Mainland international students of business and information sciences in a New Zealand university. The research questions covered their expectations of and motivations for undertaking study in New Zealand, what they learned in order to succeed, what caused them to learn it, and the nature of the changes that they experienced as a result. These questions were approached from a qualitative interpretive perspective, which “begin[s] with individuals and set[s] out to understand their interpretations of the world around them” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 22) in order not to impose pre-conceptions and constructs on them, but to uncover their own understandings of their experience and what was salient within it. While in-depth semi-structured interviews are generally seen as a useful tool for this approach (Kvale, 1996), the challenges imposed by this unfamiliar genre on second language speakers of English were recognized, and various measures taken to mitigate them. These included providing initial information in Chinese, indicating in advance the general intentions of each interview, and generally addressing the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. In this, my interest in China and in Chinese students and my somewhat parallel experience as a sojourner in their country, as well as my ability to adjust to the communicative level of the interviewees, helped develop the “friendly stranger” relations between us recommended by Cotterill (1992). I attempted in my dealings with participants to maintain a relationship of interest and concern without intrusiveness. In fact, far from finding the requirement for extensive use of English daunting, several of them revealed that this opportunity for practice had been what attracted them to the project. Of course, I remained an outsider, and, consistent with Pavlenko and Blackledge’s (2004) notion of their dynamic nature, the presentations of their selves we arrived at together are likely not to be entirely identical to those which would emerge in interviews with any other interviewer. Ethical approval was granted by the university Ethics Committee and its codes of voluntary participation, avoidance of harm and confidentiality were consistently maintained.

Fig. 1 shows the timeline for interviews. The project consisted of two parts, a longitudinal and a retrospective aspect. The longitudinal study was initially a first-semester experience study of 12 students who were interviewed three times over that period. I then extended it for five willing participants to cover the full length of study for the undergraduate degree, interviewing them again in the second semester and then annually until the end of their degree study (a total of

two or three years depending on cross-crediting from tertiary study in China; Skyrme, 2008). The retrospective perspective consisted of single interviews with 10 students nearing the end of their undergraduate study looking back on and summing up that period. Data from these students are coded R, and from those in the longitudinal study L, with the number that follows indicating which interview, from a possible total of six, the data come from. Thus, a coding of L6 indicates that this is from the final interview of a student at the end of three years of study, whereas L1 indicates the perspective of a very newly enrolled student.

Fig. 1 Timeline for the Study

Note. The data source is shown for each quote according to the code indicated.

The interviews were designed to cover a wide range of aspects of the students' experience, including their academic life, their friendships and their part-time jobs, and in doing so to be responsive to points of apparent significance that arose, encouraging further elaboration rather than a strict process of following pre-determined questions. The longitudinal study allowed me to follow up points raised in earlier interviews and check my interpretations, so inevitably the structure of later interviews became specific to each participant. More information on the interviewing strategies can be found in Skyrme and White (2011). All interviews, which were generally from 45 minutes to one hour in duration, were transcribed by me and subjected to a number of processes of data analysis, including content and line-by-line analysis, and a constant comparative process strongly influenced by a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2003)

which allowed me to notice often unforeseen themes which proved salient across the interviews of different participants, and to arrive at a finely grained responsiveness to the students' interests. The question of how interviewees saw themselves in relation to discourses of Chineseness was not a matter of direct questioning from me, but a theme that emerged in this way from the students' own framing of their experience.

Being Chinese

In their interviews, the students indicated that they were aware of various limiting ways that Chinese students were being positioned in various forums in New Zealand, from classrooms to newspaper reports, and they discussed some of their responses to those. In being presented with discourses which were ultimately reductionist and essentializing since they presented a Chinese student as some particular type of person, a range of responses was available to these participants. One of these was rejection of the concept as false, but interestingly this was rarely taken up by the students in this study. On the other hand, they could embrace the discourse and personally identify with it (along the lines of "as a Chinese person, I manifest this quality"); they could accept it but personally distance themselves from it ("unlike other Chinese people, I don't..."); they could accept it as true of some groups but distance their own from it ("we are not like that kind of Chinese student"). Finally, they could think deeply and critically about such a discourse and make choices about the values that it expressed. All of these responses were observed at different times serving different purposes. This section will provide examples where the focal students overtly recognized and claimed to share traits that they characterized as Chinese.

In a study such as this, unsurprisingly, students spoke often of the academic demands of study in New Zealand, and this has been reported on elsewhere (e.g., Skyrme, 2010a, 2010b, 2013), but underlying their discussion of reading, writing, and speaking in academic settings, the participants demonstrated an ongoing concern with identity. They had taken on the high-stakes task of gaining a degree in a new academic culture and in their second language. Inevitably this led them into encounters and demands which unsettled their views of themselves, often reducing a sense of agency they had learned to expect, as Valerie Pellegrino Aveni (2005) suggests above. For example, one of them, looking back on her

experience, noted that in China “I could control most of the things when I was in high school, I was the monitor, and, you know, the league.” In New Zealand, she had had to come to terms with the fact that “when I came here I was nothing” (R). Equally unsettling was the realization that their understanding of what it meant to be a student did not necessarily hold in the new environment:

Before the test I spent two days to stay in library, maybe seven or eight hours to review, but actually I have no point about what is the lecturer want us to catch... I don't know which part I should to focus on, should concentrate. (L2)

Naturally under such circumstances there was a degree of self-reflection leading to fluctuating redefinitions of who they were in this new context, and there were often indications of a desire for belonging to a group or groups which could make sense of their experiences. Calling on their identity as Chinese could at times serve this purpose. Being Chinese, in fact, was clearly important throughout their time in New Zealand. As is often the case (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), they remained part of close circles of Chinese friends, both through choice, since this offered them membership of a group where they could be understood and at ease, and through disappointed attempts in many cases to extend their networks to include local friends.

This sense of belonging was reflected in the fact that they often identified with traits that they saw as indicative of their Chineseness. Some of these related to competencies that allowed them to highlight ways available to them to be successful students, even in the challenging new context. They were good at maths, for example: “I’m lucky, the first exam is finance, calculate, that’s OK, I can do that. Chinese students do this better. So that’s good” (R). They were diligent: “I think Chinese student can very good, can learning, they study hard, so I, yeah, caught the lectures” (R). In fact, the New Zealand students could learn a thing or two from them in this regard: “Maybe the New Zealand students should learn from the Chinese students that they are hard study” (R). Here we can see them taking their own opportunities of positioning (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), using these attributes to claim strengths over the local students in the area of study, reversing the normal power balance, by which, certainly in early stages, the local students (“false beginners,” Gee, 2004) generally seemed to possess

much higher competency.

There were other qualities, however, which they also accepted as true, but which they felt were explanatory of difficulties that they had which led to barriers to membership of the new community of practice. Being tongue-tied in class was one of these: “Chinese student should learn the open mind, dare to speak their mind, their opinion in the lecture, to share their opinion to the classmates” (R). The aspiration implied in *should* here was echoed by another student discussing this topic. “In the Chinese people’s not much confident, and in Kiwi [New Zealand] people every people have the confident. I must need to study that, that’s a good thing. Maybe a little confident, confident, confident than before” (L2). This ability to speak out in class seemed to be seen as a key to perceiving themselves as competent university students in the New Zealand context, which they, *as* Chinese, did not have readily at hand, but which they hoped they could develop.

Another task perceived as key by one student, and in her case elusive, was that of critical and independent thinking, which she saw as existing in theory but not encouraged in practice in China:

In Asian China, we also require students to maintain a doubt when you are reading someone’s opinion, . . . but I don’t know why, most Chinese students do not own a doubt when they are reading. Maybe to follow the ordinary way is the safest way. I think. Especially in China. To be [unique] is not encouraged, I think. (R)

Claiming the absence of these desired qualities as Chinese traits seemed to allow students to accept their challenges as explicable and normal, rather than having to take responsibility for them as a personal failing.

At this time in New Zealand, being Chinese could not always be drawn on as a source of belonging, comfort, and personal understanding, however. Some of the students also referred to another discourse that was getting some mileage, fuelled by widely reported crimes committed by Chinese students. This was very negative, painting a picture of wastrel youth gambling and misbehaving. They did not reject its truth in relation to some Chinese students but distanced themselves and other students at their provincial university from it. The dangers of sweeping generalizations were very apparent to them, and they took pains to show that their Chineseness was of a very different nature, and that their personal sense of identity as Chinese was sullied by these crimes. One student indicated

that it was for this reason that he had joined the research, to counter this notion of what it was to be Chinese:

This is the main reason I joined your research. Not just to show something about me. . . but I want to show something that not all Chinese students are bad, just a few of them, just a few of them in the language schools. Just spend their parents' money. But. . . most of us study really hard. Working twelve hours a day, get many, many high grades. (R)

Clearly, distancing himself from one small group of renegade students was not a matter of denying Chineseness, but of providing a nuanced view of what being Chinese meant, in which the positive qualities of diligence and achievement which predominated in this cohort could be highlighted.

Marking Themselves Out: Constructing New Identities in New Zealand

The examples above have all indicated a readiness to see themselves as Chinese, manifesting qualities that they associated with Chinese people as a whole, or of substantial groups of them. However, they had not chosen to stay in the Chinese comfort zone. Here they were in New Zealand, and in their first interviews, the focal students had indicated that as well as the obvious goal of attaining a degree from a “Western” university, a major reason for this move was to explore new worlds, to develop independence and to experience a sense of adventure. It was not about staying the person they had always been. To remain simply marked by Chineseness would have been to have sold themselves short in this adventure. So another set of examples shows students at pains to mark themselves out from characteristics that they nevertheless accepted as Chinese norms, to differentiate themselves from the general group of Chinese students and to claim rights to self-representation (Pavlenko & Blankledge, 2004). This process was often used to show themselves as being or becoming more able to enter New Zealand ways, to indicate that membership of this new community of practice was more available to them than to their compatriots, that they were beginning to construct identities that showed a New Zealand influence. They tended to be accompanied by a note of pride.

This could simply be in relation to living in New Zealand. One student

explained that his grandfather had spent time in America and that consequently his family had “a little bit foreign culture,” rather than just eating “noodle or porridge or rice or steam bread, you know,” so “that is why I love, I can enjoy that kind of Kiwi food, and I love cheese, that is why I love ice cream” (L1). This may seem a somewhat frivolous example, but in fact this was a student who was struggling to gain a sense of competency in the academic setting, and this seems to have been for him a welcome indication of some expertise.

In the academic setting, also, as they began to feel more at ease with demands, students were quick to align themselves with more New Zealand ways of doing things, with skills they associated with being a competent member of this university body: “I found lots Chinese students do not use database. . . It seems I am quite unique ‘cause lots Chinese students do not use database” (R). Returning to the theme of the importance of overcoming reticence, one expressed pride in his second year that he had displayed agency in acquiring competence to ask questions of teachers:

Chinese student quite shy normally so they are quite afraid to talk to the lecturer face-to-face. . . but in this semester I have tried to ask every question, again, again, . . . I think this is quite good, and I think it is quite good experience for my future study. (L4)

For another student, the marker of future possibility was being able in seminar sessions to begin interaction with local students, who were often reported as the most intimidating group to enter into practices of participation with, as they seemed unable or unwilling to adjust their communication to the needs of listeners with limited proficiency. At the time of her first tentative interactions, she proudly noted her difference from “the Chinese student[s]” who “just to sit down and listen,” in recognition of her own nascent skills: “that time I think, oh, good, I know how to talk to them [local students]” (L2).

One student used a process of marking herself out from other Chinese physically as a strategy for success. At this time, there was a huge number of Chinese students in the business classes she was enrolled in, and she understood that to be Chinese was to be in danger of being invisible, especially as she used a Chinese name which New Zealand teachers had difficulty remembering. She was proud of her ability to be active in class, and wanted to make sure that this was noted: “when I handed in my assignment, I really want teachers to relate my

image and my work together and give me a reasonable mark” (R). She made a habit of going to the lecturers’ offices to ask questions to ensure she did not disappear into anonymous Chineseness but was recognized as a named individual.

Benchmarking with New Zealand Students

The examples above show instances where students began to claim identities which manifested some aspects that they saw as not typically Chinese. Ultimately, though, as well as marking themselves out from other Chinese students, they needed to see themselves as members of the new community of practice at some level. Eventually, success was to be judged not against their co-nationals but in relation to Kiwi students (as they tended to refer to their local peers): “I think I’m doing the role is a Rutherford University [pseudonym] student. Equal. Same as a Kiwi. I don’t think so we got so much difference, so many difference between Chinese Rutherford student, Kiwi Rutherford student” (L4).

They did not want special treatment, or to be seen as a separate cohort, but to achieve membership through fair and *equal* treatment. Academic success, too, was always sweeter when it showed them measuring up to and even exceeding other, New Zealand, students as this account of the assessment results of an all-Chinese group indicates: “There’s nine group, and only two group is A. One is all the Kiwi student, another one is our group, so I think that’s another encouragement to your whole study in my Rutherford life” (L5).

The revelation of this A-grade result in this student’s second year of study had been preceded in the interview by some interesting reflection on his part about Chinese and New Zealand qualities, which warrant closer examination in the section below, since they show careful consideration of traits he associated with being Chinese, but also of the value of accepting a close association with other Chinese and identifying as an all-Chinese group.

Mixing Values in a Pedagogical Space

Group work has been seen in literature as a troublesome area of connection or disconnection between domestic students and internationals, where there may be mismatched understandings of how to work in a group setting, or a degree of

disrespect on the part of locals for the ability of international students to contribute value to the group (e.g., Holmes, 2000; Leki, 2001; Strauss & U, 2007; Strauss, U, & Young, 2011; Wright & Lander, 2003). That was clearly a fear for the student in relation to this group assignment. He indicated that he had mulled for some time over the question of whether his interests would be best served by being in a group that included domestic students, or an all-Chinese group. He made a number of arguments against an all-Chinese group in response to characteristics which he portrayed as Chinese. These traits included gender issues (“all the boy may be very hard to communicate, or very stubborn. All the girls maybe compromise, say, ‘Oh, that’s fine, that’s fine, no worry, that’s fine’”), inability to collaborate (“in China it is quite weakness about the team work, because everybody think I’m the best, I’m the good and I don’t want to cooperate with you”), and laziness and disharmony in a group setting (“Chinese sometimes quite lazy and sometimes they very like to complain each other”). However, a mixed group also held enormous risk because of communication problems with local students. Based on experience in an earlier New Zealand education setting, he said it was “very hard to really to join or to involve with them together” (L5). Weighing his options carefully, he went with the all-Chinese option, and it proved highly successful and gratifying as he indicated above, the group was one of only two that received an A-grade.

What was interesting about this was that he associated the success very clearly with the Chinese group having learned some pertinent New Zealand values in their time at the university, so that he saw this as a mixing of cultures. In New Zealand, he said, there had been an emphasis on team work and they had learned the value of encouraging rather than berating. This led to their group being harmonious and motivated, and provided a high point for his study experience:

I think that’s touch me and move me, and that’s kind of change, and I think it is kind of successful about the New Zealand education because nobody, not nobody, just a few people to complain each other, most of them is quite encourage. (L5)

He understood this, then, as an interesting example of having brought together the value of doing things in the manner of New Zealand education with the advantages of membership and access that being part of a Chinese group offered

and using them both to advantage.

In their lives outside the classroom, similar reflection on the mixing of values they observed from both cultures was going on leading to Meerwald's (2001) *liminality*.

Negotiating Chinese and New Zealand Values

Although there continued to be a strongly expressed belief among these students that being Chinese was essential and important for them, extended immersion in, and understanding of, the new context inevitably pushed them to examine what this meant for them. Elements that they had taken for granted could now be seen as culturally conditioned and as such available for examination and questioning. By the end of their stay they had progressed to a discussion of values beyond agile numeracy and diligence to deeper-seated ways of relating to the world. In particular, there were a number of accounts where aspects of the new culture which they found interesting and appealing could nevertheless offer some kind of tension with notions dear to them as Chinese, as will be illustrated through ideas of fairness and independence.

The Egalitarian Society

New Zealanders pride themselves on having an egalitarian society (Phillips, 2012). There are many aspects of social organization which make such a claim somewhat hollow, but a "Jack's as good as his master" attitude and a belief that everyone deserves equal treatment prevail, at least at surface level. This had special appeal to students who found themselves in menial part-time jobs which their family circumstances had never led them to expect. One student, who worked as a cleaner, drew comfort from the fact that in New Zealand society this did not lead to social relegation, identifying this among the values he had learned:

the most important part is [being] fair. . . 'cause you know Chinese people sometime they judge people from their status. . . For example, if I'm a cleaner in New Zealand, no matter where am I going no one discriminate cleaner, they still be friend with you. (L6)

Another student similarly drew on his part-time job, this time in the university

cafeteria serving potato wedges and sour cream, to examine this equality of treatment in the light of the Chinese value of *guanxi* by which networks of personal relationships may be used to provide or solicit special treatment involving processes of reciprocity (Taormina & Gao, 2010). His experience of the “very strict” Western way caused him to question *guanxi*:

Actually this kind of very awful things, it's not very good way to deal with things. It's like, such as we know each other, and if I give the wedges maybe I'll give you more wedges and more sour cream. This kind *guanxi*, but do I need to do that, or should I to do that? Of course not! How come I know you I give you more? Or I didn't know him so I give him less? Why? We just treat everybody equally, is right? (L6)

It might appear from this that he was ready to repudiate this apparently indefensible manner of responding to relationships. However, in spite of his use of logical appraisal here in favor of New Zealand “fairness,” this was a case where he did not feel ready to throw out his long-held culturally influenced ways of being: “I think we're still, I don't know for others but for myself it's still kind of very, very enjoying *guanxi*” (L6). There appeared to be an unresolved conflict between the two.

Self and Family

A similar tension can be seen in one final example of this re-examination of values, in relation to independence in contrast to family obligation. These students were young adults, and for many it was the first time for them to live away from their families. As others have pointed out (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010), an increasing independence is an inevitable result of such circumstances, and this was both anticipated and celebrated by participants as a mark of growing maturity and life skills. However, aspects of the new experience invited a deeper philosophical concept of the independent self, upheld within a more individualist society than is China, and one of the students was very drawn to this concept: “I like the way that people believe I am what I am, I am who I am, like those kind of self identities” (L5). During his stay he had engaged in a very conscious and extensive process of exploring his independence, individuality, and the development of his possible selves in a range of spheres. He took on many personal challenges expressly to extend himself, such as the deliberate adoption

of learner autonomy, a wide-ranging exploration of religious beliefs, and challenging extra-curricular activities (Skyrme, 2008, October). This development of the self brought him to a place where the norms of family belonging and action in harmony with expectations no longer applied in the manner he had experienced them in China, but nor had he in any way become a New Zealander:

A lot of things I'm doing or I've done, from both cultures people would ask me why. Not like before back home I did something and parents probably won't ask me because they could understand. But now they don't really understand. (L6)

However, alongside this he maintained a deep attachment to a notion he identified as Chinese: "I feel like I'm more comfortable with the Chinese way of defining the family" (L6). A sense of obligation associated with this definition echoed through many of the interviews, and it was very likely the tension that existed between this obligation and his new-born independence that led this student to a careful unpacking of his new sense of self:

I wouldn't say it's like I'm more selfish now, it's not about selfish but I would say it's the self development . . . In the past it was like the responsibility to you to do something, not for myself but for family, for maybe for, I don't know, for the country, for whatever. Now I'm kind of self responsibility, you know, I something for myself, is really something I want to do rather than just people put pressures on me. (L6)

In removing himself to some extent from the obligation he had felt to consider his family or his country in the decisions he was making, he needed to defend himself from accusations (perhaps self-accusations) of being selfish, to allow this new area of self-exploration to sit at ease with other values. In passing, I would add that the personal challenges he undertook included voluntary work as a telephone counselor for distressed young people, so his judgment that his negotiation of new values and identities was not being selfish does appear entirely justified.

Discussion and Conclusion

These examples have illustrated how one broad area, alignment with, or

sometimes disassociation from, aspects of Chineseness, was used by these students in the fluid construction of identities responsive to new contexts and their evolving relationships with them as suggested in the literature reviewed above (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Pellegrino Aveni, 2005).

I would not presume to question the truth value of the discourses of Chineseness taken up by individual students here, since my interest in them is not as propositions but as tools for identity work in striving for a membership which allowed them to be and do (Gee, 2004) New Zealand university student. However, to return briefly to the issue raised at the beginning of this article, that the notion of culturally acquired traits is inadequately explanatory of individual experience, some of the discourses reported on here were certainly not used in the same way by all the students in the study. To take the first two, numeracy and diligence, for example, some of the students talked of their struggle with mathematics and even failed a compulsory statistics paper on first attempt. Their degrees of diligence varied, as one would expect in any student cohort. Some certainly immersed themselves in study to meet the seemingly overwhelming demands posed by the volume and level of reading required (Skyrme, 2010b) to the exclusion of all leisure activities (and often, as a result, of personal satisfaction). Others procrastinated, took fishing trips and pursued other interests, fell behind on assignment preparation, skimmed on study, and berated themselves for their lack of self-discipline. As far as willingness to speak out in class was concerned, initial reluctance was associated with culturally determined previous educational injunctions against such behavior. However, the response to the implicit invitation within the New Zealand university to adopt new behavior varied along lines of extraversion rather than national characteristics, with some students flourishing at the opportunity to answer questions in class, finding that it cemented their learning, while others skipped classes where they felt they were in danger of being asked to do so. In fact, the class context was itself an important determinant here, as one student had both reactions in response to different classes. They also made overt reference at times to other differences among Chinese students, including regional, experiential, personal and gender differences. The notion of the undifferentiated Chinese learner singular was certainly not an available interpretation of the data, as others have asserted (e.g., Gieve & Clark, 2005).

Nevertheless, it was clear that discourses of Chineseness performed useful functions for these students as they negotiated difficult pathways, as illustrated in Fig. 2 and explained below.

Fig. 2 Progress along a Continuum over Time in New Zealand

Although this diagram inevitably oversimplifies the continuing complexity of the students' trajectory over their years in New Zealand, it represents some general patterns that were observable in the data, and which suggest different phases in their use of these discourses.

In the first of these, a process of using their talk of Chineseness to align themselves with co-nationals predominated. Being able to claim an alignment with fellow Chinese can be seen as a source of fortification during their early experience allowing them to express a sense of membership which often eluded them in relation to the wider student body in the new community of practice. While that period was often puzzling and unsettling, Chineseness represented the known and the understood. In fact during this period, it was often to more experienced Chinese friends that they turned for advice, and most of them sought out residential arrangements that they shared with co-nationals. Even in an alien academic culture, there were, too, Chinese learning skills that at least some of them could call on to draw comfort from shared strengths that sometimes gave them an edge over New Zealand students. These positive qualities, and the examples of successful Chinese students that they saw around them, gave them a counter to media reports positioning Chinese students in a

far less admirable light, a position which they vigorously resisted for themselves. Even where the notions of Chineseness called on indicated what could be seen as weaknesses in this community of practice, they could serve as an explanation of their personal difficulty, thereby giving them permission to struggle and sometimes to fail.

In the next phase, as they began to feel they were gaining more competency in the new context, there was a process of distancing themselves somewhat from characteristics they identified as Chinese. By differentiating themselves, they could indicate a process of alignment with the new demands, providing a marker of their growing success, which indeed eventually enabled them to claim new identities as New Zealand university students, equal to, and sometimes better than, other students around them.

The final phase can be characterized as one of weighing up and choosing values from the pool that they now had mature experience of. As they came to a deeper understanding of the new context, they engaged in reflection, noticing how they had already been influenced by the new, and seeing themselves in a position to make choices about who they might be in the future. This was not necessarily a straightforward choice, of course, since they were drawn in different directions, and the *liminality* that Meerwald (2001) noted was very apparent.

This study certainly upheld the notion of multilingual spaces, especially those making high-stakes demands as university study does, requiring a complex process of negotiation of identity, passing through stages which can make one very aware of “who we are not” (Wenger, 1998, p. 153), in order to arrive at a sense of membership of a community of practice. This was primarily a study of their experiences within that central community, the university, but not surprisingly revealed that the re-positioning entailed in seeking legitimacy there inevitably involved recognition and sometimes re-negotiation of their positions in relations to other communities, including an amorphous and fluid community of Chineseness. Changes to self were inevitable, but never entirely overthrew earlier identities. By the end of their study, these people were occupying identity spaces that represented neither where they had originally come from nor by any means fully New Zealand identities. They were increasingly both being Chinese *and* being different. In this, they were clearly finding fulfillment of the promise of adventure and personal growth they had

indicated in their first interviews.

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