Language, Identity and Sense of Belonging: The Case of Chinese in South Africa
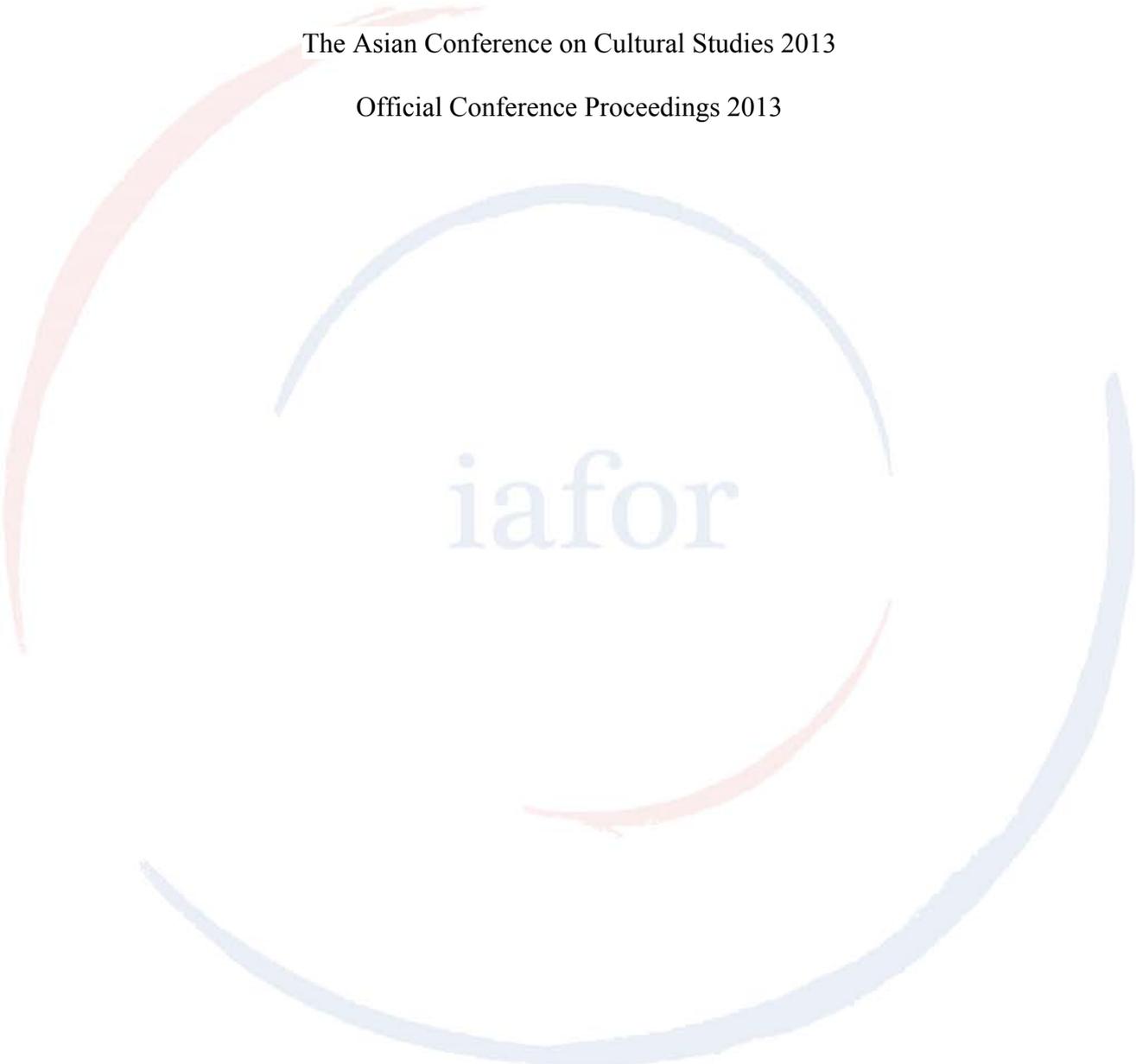
Ke Yu

Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa

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Immigrants generally lose their language and distinctive ethnic identity through three stages and roughly within three generations. However, these two parallel processes do not necessarily occur at the same speed. In this paper, we examine the case of the Chinese in South Africa, in particular the group known today as South African-born Chinese (SABCs) who are now 3rd or 4th generation of the earliest immigrants, and explore the extent to which various factors have impacted on language and identity retention and/or loss within this group. Our findings point to great heterogeneity. While some of them have lost both the Chinese language and identity, suggesting a strong link between language and identity; others have retained a strong sense of Chineseness, but lost their Chinese language capabilities; yet others maintain some Chinese language skills without a sense of being Chinese. We therefore conclude that the situational view of the language-identity link is more appropriate to explain this heterogeneity of the SABC case.

The language and identity nexus—two schools of thoughts

Literature on the language and identity nexus is divided: one perspective denotes an inextricable link; the other takes a more situational view, arguing that, depending on the context, the link might become non-essential.

According to Joshua A Fishman, considered the father of the sociology of language, the relationship between language and cultural identity is critical, interdependent and inseparable (Guardado 2008). As Edwards (1985) notes, the linguistic criterion is often considered as *the* critical marker distinguishing one nation from another, giving the discussion of language maintenance an additional political dimension (May 2000). In this context, language is said to be linked with national consciousness, national loyalty, uniqueness, unity, autonomy, purity, and groupness. Besides nation-building, this inextricable link argument is also often used in the discussions of minority languages and language loss, all domains easily evoking great emotional poignancy (Edwards 1985; May 2000).

This school of thought generally believes that language is a conditional marker of identity, closely linked with tradition and collective mythology (May 2000; Tannenbaum, 2009). Every time one speaks a language, one is also organizing and reorganizing the sense of who one is and how one relates to the social world, Norton maintains (1997, 2000). Language is the "most salient way we have of establishing and advertising our social identities" (Lippi-Green 1997, 5). In fact, the link between language and identity is believed to be so strong that language use alone is believed to be sufficient to identify someone's membership in a given group (Gee 1996; Tabouret-keller 1997, cited in Kamwangamalu 2007).

The situational view, on the other hand, highlights the importance of examining particular historical and social contexts to understand identity and language use (Sears et al 2003; Noels et al 2010). In John Edwards's seminal work supporting this

situational view (1985), he uses the example of the Irish where "strong sentimental attachments to Irish were not accompanied by language use, nor by desire to actively promote it, nor yet by optimism concerning its future, among the population at large" (51) and reaches the conclusion that "language per se has typically not been of the greatest concern to people possessing these identities…[and] it is not necessary to retain an original variety in order to maintain the continuity of a sense of groupness" (159). Edwards (1985) further argues that security and freedom (or other such pragmatic needs) often preoccupies the minority groups much more than the concerns over culture or language, especially in the face of increasing urbanisation, modernisation, in-migration, and the pressure of socioeconomic advancement. In this sense, the insistence to maintain one's heritage language could even be seen as a barrier to social access, advancement and mobility by the minority groups, especially for most immigrants for whom material well-being and personal security "are often the very thing which lead to immigration itself" (Edwards 1985, 96). According to him, the same pragmatism also explains the often longer continuity of other cultural markers, such as cultural activities, festivals, dress, ornamentation, dance, songs because these markers "do not hinder mobility or adversely mark group members" (Edwards 1985, 97, 101), and thus can be retained as "marks of distinction... which contribute to continuity without hindering social progress" (160). In conclusion, Edwards asserts that "the choices involved in adapting to new requirements are often made in terms of the least possible disruption to existing lifestyle; elements which can remain in position without incurring penalties, do so" (97).

The linguistic/identity experience of immigrants

 The term "tug-of-war" has been used to describe an immigrant's experience as early as 1938 (Haugen 1938). This "war" generally refers to the tension between an old and new self, between the preservation of one's heritage culture on the one hand, and the adaptation to one's host society on the other (Block 2006).

Many scholars see linguistic adjustments essential to the processes of adaptation and "fitting in" (eg. Marshall 2009, Tannenbaum, 2005). For example, Tannenbaum reports on a positive relationship between host language proficiency and the immigrant's well-being in terms of economic, academic, professional or personal aspects (2005, 229). Other scholars maintain that language plays a central role in the process of culture and identity preservation. Mother tongue symbolizes origins, childhood landscapes, early memories, common ancestry, shared values and beliefs. Thus, "retaining a native language is a crucial index of the preservation of cultural roots after immigration" (Sears et al 2003, 427). A shared heritage language also contributes to more relaxed, intimate and familiar relationships (Tannenbaum 2005; Zhang 2012), and helps to maintain ethnic participation (Phinney et al 2001a). Losing it could be accompanied "by a deep sense of loss of self-identity and of internal objects" (Mirksy 1991, 620).

Generational analysis of immigrants has recorded the shifting pattern of identification over generations, with "each generation…moves a step farther from the immigration experience in regard to language use, residential segregation, education and the like" (Sears et al 2003, 434). A complete shift is generally believed to occur in three stages and within the 3rd and 4th generation after immigration (Phinney et al 2001a). Similar to this general shift in identification and sense of belonging, linguistic analysis of generations among immigrants or minority groups who encountered more powerful majority groups also allude to the classic three-stage pattern:

> the 1st stage sees increasing pressure on minority language speakers to speak the majority language, particularly in formal language domains [often by introduction of education in the majority language]… the 2nd stage sees a period of bilingualism, in which both languages continue to be spoken concurrently. However, this stage is usually characterised by a decreasing number of minority language speakers, especially among the younger generation, along with a decrease in the fluency of speakers as the minority language is spoken less, and employed in fewer and fewer language domains. The 3rd and final stage—which may occur over the course of 2 or 3 generations, and sometimes less—sees the replacement of the minority language with the majority language. The minority language may be 'remembered' by a residual group of language speakers, but it is no longer spoken as a wider language of communication. (May 2000, 366-367).

This three-stage pattern also generally completes within three generations, barring any special effort (Edwards 2004, see also Ebaugh & Chafetz 2000; Fishman 1991).

This parallel shift of both identification and language may support the inextricable link thesis. However, it is also possible that both undergo similar shifts but one shift more rapidly than the other, implying a period of time where the two are not inextricably linked. Furthermore, both emotional attachments and practical concerns influence these shifts in language and identity, with practical concerns expected to impact more heavily on language (and the rapidity thereof). A stronger emotional attachment to ethnic identity is expected to result in a more gradual and thereof slower shift. In the next section, we examine the factors that may push or pull language fluency and sense of ethnic identity in similar or different directions, with different strengths, resulting in a weakened or strengthened link between the two.

Factors influencing language fluency, sense of identity, and the language-identity link

Literature has identified numerous factors influencing immigrant experiences in terms of their ethnic language proficiency and retention, and/or their sense of ethnic identity and attachment. These can be broadly categorized into include aspects of the external environment (societal and communal), family dynamics and individual demographics.

The general attitude of the host society towards the immigrant community, 'context of reception', is "an important factor for understanding the group's integration into,

acceptance of, and success in a host society" (Doucet 2003 78). In instances of real or perceived hostility, "immigrants may downplay or reject their own ethnic identity" (Phinney et al 2001b, 494), or they may "assert their pride in their cultural group and emphasize solidarity as a way of dealing with negative attitudes" (Phinney et al 2001b, 494, also see Daha 2011; Doucet 2003; Smolicz et al 2001).

The nature of the immigrant community in the host society is also critical in determining the language/identity experience, particularly through the kind of institutional and social support available for individual immigrants and families. In places where the immigrant community is small and dispersed, cultural participation and exposure is limited, learning and maintenance of home language may decline, and sense of ethnic identity may weaken. A large, concentrated and well-established immigrant community, on the other hand, can provide opportunities to immigrants to join cultural organisations, to access social support and networks, and to have stronger bargaining power in negotiating with the host society (Kim and Chao 2009; Lai 2012; Paat and Pellebon 2012; Phinney et al 2001b; Zhang 2012).

The importance of the size and availability of in-group/out-group peer interaction needs to be highlighted as well. A small circle of in-group friends, resulting from a small heritage community, could hinder heritage language ability (Phinney et al 2001a; Portes and Hao 1998). An additional factor related to schooling and influenced by the size of the immigrant community is the availability of schools that teach the heritage language (Edwards 1985; Smolicz et al 2001; Spolsky 1989). Besides providing additional education in heritage language, many of these schools also provide social networks and transmission of culture through the observation of events and celebrations (Francis et al 2009).

Family dynamics and parents' efforts to transfer values and cultural awareness to their children are also notable factors (Gaurdado 2008; Paat and Pellebon 2012; Smolicz et al 2001; Tannenbaum & Howie 2002). The need for family communication is often found to be a crucial factor motivating parents to retain the heritage language or not. The roles of parents are especially significant where there is little contact with the culture of origin, as in small and dispersed communities (Suarez-Orozco 2004, 6).

Demographic variables informing how the individual immigrant experiences include length of residency in the host country, age at the time of immigration, and gender (Goodenow and Espin 1993; Paat and Pellebon 2012; Portes and Hao 1998).

Chinese in South Africa – historical background and 'context of reception'

There are three distinct Chinese communities in South Africa: 1) Chinese mainly from Guangzhou province who first came to SA in the late 1870s and are now 3rd or 4th generation; 2) Taiwanese investors who arrived in the late 1970s and 1980s under the apartheid government's industrial development policy; and 3) the newer immigrants arriving from the mid- to late-1990s, mainly from the People's Republic of China (PRC), who consist of middle managers, professionals, as well as small traders

(Accone 2006; Huynh, Park and Chen 2010). In this paper, we focus primarily on the experience of the first group, most of whom are South African-born Chinese (thus calling themselves SABCs).

Historical studies of the SABCs suggest that the first Chinese arriving in South Africa comprised two separate groups – the Cantonese and the Moiyean – who settled in the Transvaal province and coastal towns in South Africa respectively due to their language and ethnic differences and the tensions that arose thereby (Park 2006). Most of these early immigrants were attracted by the discovery of gold in South Africa. Once arrived, however, they were banned from obtaining mining contracts due to anti-Chinese sentiment and racial discrimination. Most of them therefore became shopkeepers and general dealers, running businesses ranging from shops, eateries, laundries and butcheries, to tailoring businesses, tea-houses and fahfee games (Accone 2006; Park 2006). Many of these Chinese originally planned to return to China once they became successful. However, most remained in South Africa for various reasons, including the numerous wars that occurred in China during the time; the establishment of Communist rule thereafter; the increasingly restricted immigration policies in South Africa; and the possibility that failure to achieve success they hoped meant returning home and admitting to a loss of honour (Accone 2006; Park 2008).

Once it was clear that they would no longer be sojourners but settlers, securing a place in South Africa became their priority. This, however, proved to be a constant struggle. Like other non-white groups, the Chinese in apartheid South Africa were subjected to numerous restrictive and discriminatory policies, including overarching race-based legislation as well as exclusively anti-Chinese policies. Almost all aspects of life were regulated: entry (immigration), citizenship, travel, allowed profession, trade, alcohol possession, area of residency, land/property purchasing right, inter-racial marriage, etc. (Park 2008; Yap and Man 1996). Periodically, they were also subjected to overt hostile outbursts from the ruling whites over "fears that Chinese would overrun the colonial whites" (Park 2008, 11). In the face of such cornered hostility, their position and attitude throughout apartheid was one of "practicality and caution" (Park 2008, 52). They avoided attracting attention and confrontation whenever possible and mainly employed quiet diplomacy to secure gradual improvement of their treatment. This was done primarily through continual concession-seeking petitions and negotiations, often based on their distinct Chineseness (Park 2006, 219). As historian Karen Harris explains,

> they always saw themselves as distinct and separate from all other groups in South Africa, including the Chinese indentured mine labourers. Furthermore, there was a sense of elitism and exclusivity in all their protests for better treatment…this sense of superiority was rooted in their very Chineseness – their membership in an ancient and superior civilization (cited in Park 2006, p217).

Language and identity shifts among the Chinese in South Africa

The Chinese experience in South Africa exemplifies the kind of 'tug-of-war' pressures noted earlier. Several of the factors alluded to in the earlier section impacted on this group's language and identity shifts.

With regard to identity, the continuous attachment of the SABCs to their Chineseness was primarily emotional and largely induced by the hostility of the "context of reception". During the long years of severe discrimination, they "continue[d] to look to mainland China as 'home'" (Park 2008, 54), although "many [spoke] no Chinese languages…[and] most [had] never travelled to China" (Park 2009, 5). For many, they continued to "cling to an increasingly distanced and mythologised China" for a sense of comfort (Park 2008, 54), similar to Pan's description of how "a consciousness of shared origin…compensated for the feeling of being lost in a new country" (1994, 12). According to Park, this emotional attachment became an enduring point of belonging:

> For several generations, their Chineseness—the sense of belonging to the great, imagined nation of China—was a peg upon which to hang their identity. China, both political and cultural, the real and the imagined, provided the Chinese South African with an identity 'refuge' and fulfilled their need to belong (Park 2008, 76).

Today, relatively few of the SABCs can boast fluency in any Chinese language (Park 2008, 109). This loss of language is sometimes a source of shame and embarrassment (Park 2008). However, during apartheid, Language maintenance by the SABCs was marked by grave practical challenges, deriving mainly from the following intertwined features:

- The availability of a Chinese education and language school. When immigration restriction was not tight, many sent their children to China to be educated and to learn the Chinese language and culture (Park 2008, 108). However, "in the early 1950s, particularly after the Immigrants Regulation Amendment Act was passed in 1953, travel to and from China became increasingly difficult" (Park 2008, 80). Sending children to China was thus no longer viable, and the importation of Chinese teachers also became increasingly impossible.
- The existence of different Chinese languages. The two original dialects of the SABCs (Cantonese and Moiyeanese) are mutually unintelligible, and communication was further complicated with the introduction of Mandarin as the national Chinese language in 1923 (Yap & Man 1996). Chinese schools in South Africa were thus facing the question of which Chinese to teach; they are also limited by what language the available Chinese teacher was able to teach (Yap & Man 1996, 281).
- The need for social mobility and advancement. As Park (2008) explains,

> As discriminatory apartheid legislation threatened the community's future, a solid education came to be seen as a priority. This would equip people to seek greater mobility in the professions, thereby bypassing the uncertainties of the Group Areas Act (and its impact on trading) and other apartheid laws…over the years, the value of having a Chinese education waned…education was seen more as a means to upward economic mobility; this engendered a need to be proficient in English…the increasing tendency for parents to send their children to white private schools, and the decline in the general Chinese school-aged population [the Chinese population sorely depended on the natural growth within the community], resulted in a continuing drop in student populations at most of the Chinese schools (Park 2008, 80-82).

This made many schools unsustainable.

- Community size and concentration. More concentrated communities, like the Chinese in Johannesburg, had a crucial mass large enough to sustain community activities such as associations, clubs, schools, and festivals (Park 2008, 112). But for smaller or more dispersed communities, as is the case in the smaller towns across South Africa, a strong community organisation or integration was simply not viable (Park 2008, 82).

- The passing of generations and the decreased need to use Chinese as a communicative language. Many SABCs spoke Chinese "while their parents or grandparents were alive, but with the passing of older generations they lost both the impetus and opportunity to practise the language" (Park 2008, 109).

In our own study of the Chinese community in Pretoria, the administrative capital of South Africa (Houston, Wentzel, Yu and Vivier 2013), we look specifically at this relatively small (albeit tightly bound) SABC community where everyone had been involved with one another through various overlapping Chinese community platforms. Our finding points to evidence supporting the thesis made by other SABC scholars that loss of language among this group often precedes the loss of identity. However, we also find much greater heterogeneity, with some describing a simultaneous loss of language and identity, while others continue to observe particular Chinese cultural practices and seem to retain a sense of Chineseness and Chinese values, despite a common loss of language skills. The following selected snapshots of our participants are given to show the complicated language/identity profiles and various trajectories.

Bill

Bill was born in 1944 and is a third generation SABC. He can still speak Cantonese but cannot read it. He keeps up with what goes on in China, but through English television. He has on occasions gone China to visit extended family there. He participates in some overlapping Chinese associations in Pretoria, but considers himself to be a South African. He is proficient in Sesotho, one of the indigenous languages in South Africa. Bill contributes his lack of strict loyalty to the Chinese

community to an earlier, unpleasant experience where one of his close Chinese friends was ousted from the community because it disapproved of his political engagements. He admits however that he is trying to instil "Chinese ethics" in his family, namely to have a strong work ethic and to be productive.

Samuel

Samuel was born in 1949 and is a second generation SABC. He still has contacts in China, and he and his family have visited China. He believes there is a still "that link" with the family, but indicates that it is not a "day to day link". Although he used to be able to speak Cantonese while his grandmother was still alive and living with the family, since her passing he has lost this language ability. According to Samuel, the SABCs "tend to distance themselves from the mainland Chinese culture" due to different value systems, and in fact retain much greater similarity with the Afrikaner (the dominant South African white) culture. He also explains how particular discriminating and humiliating experiences during apartheid kept the Chinese community closer together (e.g. having to apply for a permit to go to high school; having to get permission from potential neighbours before being able to purchase a house). Since democracy in South Africa in 1994 though, the Chinese community, he believes, has become more integrated in the local society and "find the Chinese culture less important".

James

James was born in 1959 and is a second generation SABC. He mainly attended private white schools and recounts several experiences of racism and discrimination which made it feel "degrading" to be Chinese. He was not active in the Chinese community when he was young, but did spend weekends and social time with Chinese friends at the Chinese School. Currently he is much more involved in Chinese activities such as organising festivals and doing fundraising. Because he was teased at school for not speaking English "properly", he wanted to learn English "as if I came from England". According to him, the quicker one can assimilate into the host country, the better off one will be. James speaks no Chinese. Today he feels that South Africa is home because he was born here. But, as he explains, "I'll always be Chinese no matter what I speak, but the point is that I want to be able to speak English so that I don't have another barrier between the person who speaks English, or Afrikaans or Sesotho [local languages that he is fluent in]".

Andrew

Andrew is a 41 year old third generation SABC. He learned Chinese as a child when he lived with his grandmother and it was the only way to communicate with her. His family in South Africa has very little communication with their extended family back in China, primarily, he explains, because "they only speak and write in Chinese and we only speak and write in English". He still speaks some Chinese, and occasionally goes on business trips to China as an informal translator. His Chinese "is not that

good to be able to negotiate business, but it's good enough to order stuff and get around". In fact, Andrew describes his Chinese as "kitchen Chinese", a basic, undeveloped form which, he says, one is often ashamed to speak among other Chinese. His written Chinese is also "very bad". Andrew's Afrikaans is better than his Chinese, and he considers himself to be fully South African, describing his social activities as South African in nature.

Sarah

Sarah is 22 years old and is a fourth generation SABC. Her parents speak English and Cantonese between themselves and used to speak Cantonese to her when she was younger, but this did not succeed in motivating her to learn Chinese. She only attended private, English schools and acknowledges the influence of her friends and school on her identity: "At home my parents have tried to keep me as Chinese as possible, but because I spend most of my time at school, I bring that with me at home". According to Sarah, the Chinese community in Pretoria is so small, particularly for her generation, that there are few chances for them to get together and interact. But, she acknowledges that her lack of Chinese speaking ability also hinders her involvement in Chinese social groups. Although she still understands a bit of conversational Cantonese, she does not speak it at all. She speaks fluent Afrikaans and English. Among her friends, she explains, some speak to their parents in Chinese, some speak to their parents in English even when their parents speak Chinese, and some only speak English. However, she is still "proud to be a Chinese South African" and describes how her parents have instilled in her Chinese culture: "There are smaller things that we do at home like the ceremony to honour our ancestors. My father does that regularly with his family. I want to do that when I grow older." She also plans to teach her children what she has of the Chinese culture (e.g. the honouring ceremony, giving tea with two hands). But since her fiancée is not Chinese, she isn't sure if or how she will instil the Chinese culture into her children. She however hope they will be still proud of being half Chinese.

The heterogeneity of the SABCs: a case for the situational view

The above examination indicates a general experience of both language and identity loss. However, as our study of the Chinese in Pretoria shows, even among only five individuals vast differences in language abilities and identities are apparent, showing variations in the generational shifts and the speed of language/identity loss, as well as in the types of factors (emotional and practical) influencing these shifts.

The snapshot profiles presented include individuals who are second, third and fourth generation SABCs. Contrary to literature that indicates a general three generations pattern in the language and identity shift, we find a complete shift with regard to language in one fourth generation individual (Sarah) and both second generation individuals (Samuel and James). Both third generation individuals, however, retained some of their Chinese language abilities, with the one speaking fluent Cantonese and

the other "Kitchen Chinese" (Bill and Andrew, respectively). In terms of identity shifts, the three older participants (one third generation and two second generation) expressed strong shifts towards a South African identity, mainly identifying themselves as South African. However, a lingering sense of attachment to being Chinese, or to having Chinese values, is also noted in two of these individuals. Among the two younger participants, one (third generation) reported a complete identity shift, while another (fourth generation) said that she is still practicing some Chinese traditions and is proud to be a Chinese South African.

Combining these variations, we see only one instance where there was a complete shift in both identity and language (Samuel), two instances indicating a complete shift in language but not in identity (James and Sarah), and two other instances where there was a complete shift in identity but not in language (Bill and Andrew). These examples confirm that language and identity shifts may occur separately, the one more gradually or rapidly than the other, and therefore not inextricably linked.

The heterogeneity illustrated above suggests that the situational view is more nuanced and has greater explanatory power for the language/identity nexus. For one, this perspective is able to explain cases where there is a weak language/identity link, as in the case of Sarah and James, as well as the Irish case in earlier discussion. It allows that "the loss of a particular language is not the 'end of the world' for a particular ethnic identity" (May 2000, 372). This perspective is also able to explain cases where there is a relatively strong language/identity link, and instances of simultaneous diminishing of both language and identity.

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