

Peggy Chau

ASIX 300A – Podcast Transcript and Reference

Title of Podcast: “You’re too white to be Chinese!” — Navigating Identity as a Biracial Individual

Host: Peggy Chau (Green)

Guest: Catherine (Yellow)

References are highlighted in blue in the transcript.

Transcript

Introduction

Catherine: I really just loved the idea of being able to embrace, like, all of my culture. So that meant my British culture, my Canadian culture, and my Chinese culture. And I wanted them for me to be, like, one big culture, one thing that I could kind of use to express myself, but that isn't how the world often sees biracial people.

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Peggy: Acculturation is the process of cultural adaptation when one encounters different cultures, usually their heritage culture and mainstream culture. But what about those with a mix of cultures in their lives, such as people who might be ethnically diverse or biracial? Hi! I am your host, Peggy. In today’s episode, I interviewed my friend Catherine, who has a blend of Chinese, British, and Canadian backgrounds, to understand how her diverse cultural background has shaped her journey of acculturation and what her cultures mean to her.

Literature Review

Peggy: Over time, our understanding of acculturation has evolved from linear to multidimensional. Currently, the most used model is introduced by Berry. It is bidimensional and identifies four acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Assimilation includes the identification of

mainstream culture but not heritage culture. Integration involves the adaptation of both mainstream and heritage culture, leading to a bicultural identity. Separation is the rejection of mainstream culture and the retention of heritage culture. Marginalization can be observed when one rejects both mainstream and heritage culture. (Schwart et al, 2014) It is also crucial to focus on the complexity of acculturation. Scholars highlight the importance of considering various factors that influence the experience of acculturation, such as cultural similarity between the receiving culture and heritage culture, and discrimination. (Schwart et al, 2010)

Background

Peggy: Let's look at Catherine's background first before starting our discussion. Catherine was born and raised in a small town in Canada, where people are predominantly white. She is half-British and half-Chinese, with her mother's side being Chinese and her father's side being British. Based on her experience, I will focus on how generational trauma and her experience as a biracial person contribute to her acculturation.

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Generational Trauma

Peggy: Catherine's mother is a second-generation immigrant. Growing up, her family experienced a lot of racism as one of the two non-white families in the city.

Catherine: Her and her family's experiences were definitely really tough. They were considered to be, like, outsiders, or people saw them as, you know like, exotic zoo animals type of idea. They would exhibit pretty common stereotypes, and also would display violence and pretty explicit racism. They would sing these like common American born songs that were about Chinese people. They would you know do the

thing where they pulled their eyes to make them squinty. They would say the whole like Ching Chong thing, can you understand me... Like it was pretty, I think, bad for what we would consider racism to be today.

Peggy: The experience of racism and the limited experience with Chinese culture assimilated most of Catherine's Chinese relatives into the mainstream Canadian culture. They are very distant from Chinese culture and also do not want to connect with it. They would even downgrade their heritage culture.

Catherine: I remember one of the things that I heard a lot growing up was that Cantonese was an ugly language, especially in comparison to Mandarin. They said if you learn Chinese, you should learn Mandarin. And I remember thinking that that's not what I wanted to do because I wanted to learn Cantonese because of the connection that I had with my grandmother and my family. My grandmother does not speak Mandarin therefore to me it's not very useful.

Peggy: Under this discouraging environment, Catherine was hesitant to embrace her Chinese heritage. However, her mother stands out among her siblings as the most deeply connected to Chinese culture. She also shares a tight-knit relationship with her grandmother. Driven by the familial connections, she began to value her Chinese roots despite the discouragement. She became motivated to learn about Chinese culture and engage in what researchers call "reactive ethnicity" (Rumbaut in Schwart et al, 2010), which is the phenomenon that one develops a stronger attachment to their cultural heritage when faced with external challenges or stressors. Her journey of integration started with learning about Chinese culture from her grandmother through affective appraisal, which is from social attachment (Castillo & Caver in Schwart et al, 2014) and her feelings towards Chinese culture (Cheung, 2024). It further leads her to cognitive acculturation, which is through the core values (Castillo & Caver in Schwart

et al, 2014) and knowledge about the culture (Cheung, 2024). Growing up, she was exposed to Chinese culture mainly through her grandmother's food. Now, she is able to explore more aspects of the culture herself.

Catherine: I like it a lot, and, it just, it was, it's something that almost feels like a home away from home. Growing up, I didn't have a lot of it directly accessible. As for now, I do. And I know one of the things that I've learned is, for me, nothing beats Chinese food. It's 100% my favorite cuisine. And now that I'm in Richmond, I have so much access to so much different food which also has allowed me to explore different kinds of food too that I wasn't that weren't accessible to me before. But in general, I do really like Chinese culture and I really am excited to learn more. And it's kind of the beauty of the culture is also what keeps me motivated. Just knowing there's so much different like historical context to what exists now makes me really interested to continue learning about that and then also continuing to learn more about like modern day culture too.

Catherine: I know about the parts that affect me or my family. But other than that, I have a lot of missing pieces, as I don't quite have the experience to back it up. I know one of the things that I feel like I do lack a lot from is there's a lot of historical contexts. There are a ton of different little, like I don't... There's just little things that sometimes my friends will do, that they're like "Oh it's tradition," And I go "Oh that's really cool!" And it's something that new, that I've learned, which is really cool. But there's a lot of those things that I haven't picked up on yet. Similarly I know my grandma has, like, a ton of superstitions, and I know virtually nothing about them, but it's a really big deal to her so I'm trying to. But those are definitely some of the areas that I want to get to know about more because those are the ones that kind of directly affects the people that I care about.

Peggy: Engaging in affective and cognitive acculturation enriches Catherine's understanding of Chinese culture and drives her interest and curiosity in it, which further enhances her cultural competence and allows her to participate meaningfully in cultural practice. Eventually, she is able to embrace her Chinese roots and cultivate Chinese values inside her, such as spending more time with her Chinese family than her British family because of the traditional Chinese value of family being the priority.

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Experience as A Biracial Person

Peggy: Catherine's experience as a biracial person is highly influenced by her physical appearance. Being white perceiving, most people do not know her biracial identity until they are told so. She received racism after disclosing her Chinese identity growing up. She also explains that people change their perspective on her immediately after finding out she is biracial, like she is a totally different person.

Catherine: ...So that wasn't a thing I really experienced until people learned of my Chinese heritage. I remember one distinct thing that is kind of a funny memory I shared with my brother, but one that isn't exactly pleasant, in which I believe I was 9 or 10 years old. And a kid, that was about 13 at the time, knew my brother, and therefore he knew that I was also half- Chinese. And he, for a couple of days straight, would go up on, go up to me on the playground and call me the C slur, directed towards Chinese people, and that one was I think one of the more pivotal moments as being a child is I didn't understand why I was being like picked out from other people. And I know that it was cu-... My brother did protect me, but that was he- that was one of the moments that I think I really recognize that something was different.

Peggy: Another experience she had is that people often view her as special, or maybe even “exotic,” due to their narrow exposure to biracial or mixed people. Although it is not intended to be offensive, she found that very demeaning since she feels like her Chinese heritage, an important part of her, is overlooked. The fear of her Chinese roots being diminished led to her resentment towards her British heritage when she was young.

Catherine: It feels quite degrading, as if, you know, this part of me that's always been part of me and it's been [there] almost my entire life doesn't count.

Peggy: Therefore, it motivates her to hang out more with Chinese people, since they embrace more of her Chinese heritage than others who simply see her as white. Her biracial identity is more represented. The interaction further drives her cultural competence and the ability to interact with people of Chinese culture.

Catherine: I feel more seen when I'm with Chinese people, and that's not anything to do with, I think, culture as much as it is to do with the fact that they've they can see the mixed side of me more than other people can, despite wherever their heritage lies. I know that the majority of the Chinese people I've met in recent times, they are so lovely when it comes to me expressing any doubts about my culture or any uncertainties regarding, you know, my place. They're so kind and people are just generally really supportive about me learning the language like, “Wow you only speak English and now you're learning Canto, like, that's so hard to do! You're doing so well!” And, you know, even like I have a couple Canto friends who are, like, just encouraging me, saying like, “Oh your pronunciation is really good!” and stuff like that.

Peggy: Catherine also received criticism growing up because of her white-passing

appearance and her inability to speak Chinese. She felt guilty for identifying more as Chinese despite looking white. As a result, she went through the “hazing” stage like other biracial individuals which is the process of proving themselves to be a member of an ethnic community (Root in Kim, 2016). As she progressed through the journey, she realized the importance of connecting with her heritage for her own sake, instead of external validation. It led her to a healthier relationship with her Chinese heritage and to her personal growth.

Catherine: So even though the start was rocky, I think after I kind of recognize the fact that I should be doing this for me, it became a lot smoother. And I felt a little bit more confident about talking to people about it, and like, you know, getting some input from my other Cantonese friends, just about different things.

Peggy: Catherine’s experience enlightens her journey of self-discovery and identity exploration. She learned to embrace her biracial identity, and is more empowered to connect with her Chinese roots. Although the mismatch between her appearance and her personality brings challenges in accepting her biracial identity, it eventually leads to bicultural harmony and the recognition that all her cultures are equally important.

Family Environment

Peggy: Family environment moderates one’s experience of acculturation (Cheung, 2024). Different parenting styles affect the perceived autonomy in children, and the cultural context of the family also influences parental expectations in socialization (Park et al, 2010). In Catherine’s case, she has a very close relationship with her parents. Both her parents are authoritative and encourage cultural diversity within her household. Her mother, especially, is very supportive of her learning about Chinese culture despite her limited resources. It creates an autonomous environment for her to

understand her identity and set goals for her acculturation.

Catherine: She just wanted me to embrace what she didn't have so she was very, very willing to support me in whatever journey I decided to take. So when I wanted to start learning Cantonese probably about four or five years ago, she said that she was willing to do whatever she could to support me, whether that meant paying for lessons or finding resources like I know she tried to go to the library and find different books but it didn't quite work out.

Peggy: Her father's assimilation into Canadian culture restricts her access to British culture growing up. But she also mentioned how Canadian culture is partially derived from British culture due to historical context, which highlights how the cultural similarity causes her separation from British culture.

Catherine: My dad is quite removed from British culture as he did almost entirely grow up in Canada. He moved here in visibly 4, so for him Canadian cultures been the majority of his life, which is still largely a part of British culture. But, yeah, I'd say we definitely are more of a Canadian traditional household, but we do have, I would say, if I were to kind of break it down, I'd say it's like 80% Canadian, maybe like 15% Chinese, and then that extra 5% is, kind of, I guess you could say it's British, or it's just, kind of, whatever, whatever is brought into the family.

Catherine: They just want me to feel comfortable in my own skin. And especially because they witnessed so much of my troubles growing up, I think they just want me to find, I guess, who I really am and just the place that I personally feel like I fit in with society and my different cultures.

Peggy: Besides her immediate family, her tight-knit relationship with her grandmother, who she gained most of her understanding of Chinese culture from, also

contributes a lot to her integration into Chinese culture. Despite the language barrier, the love and support they share for each other allows her to navigate more freely during her journey of identity searching.

Catherine: She is still one of my biggest support systems and you know we can't talk about it but I know how much she loves me. I know how highly she thinks of me and I know that she knows how highly I think of her as well.

Cultural Identity

Peggy: When it comes to constructing Catherine's cultural identity, she admits it is very difficult to decide it with all her heritage cultures, especially when most people view culture as binary.

Catherine: The very common thing that I got growing up is, just like, "oh just a pick a side", "which one are you more of."

Catherine: We need to recognize that, like, all culture should be viewed as equal, which isn't necessarily something that isn't happening right now but it's something that I feel like is very black and white, very binary at its current stages, you know? Hence what I was saying earlier about just "picking a side," like you have to be one or the other, you can't be a mixture of both.

Peggy: As someone active in social justice, her ambiguous position used to stop her from speaking up because she was told not to have the right to participate in certain discussions as a white-perceiving biracial individual. Now that she has found her place in society, she is most comfortable saying that she is biracial and wishes to use her experience to push equality among mixed people.

Catherine: I do think that something I've become really proud of right now is that I have my own voice and that voice is very, very, very unique. I think the reason why I

believe a lot of people are so binary about culture is because they just don't have a lot of exposure to people with multiple cultures and multiple different pieces of heritage. So I think that's the part where I feel like my voice really comes into play and is very valuable. It's also recognizing that part of inequality, being that there's a lot of discrimination against mixed people because of the way that binary equality is pushed, that it's just "you're all going to be different groups but everyone should be equal" rather than "everyone has their own diverse experiences, their own culture, their own like different viewpoints that are who they are," And that's where I feel like my voice is really valuable. And that's why I want to continue, kind of, pushing my identity is in that direction of, like, using my experiences to be able to help other people who are going through similar crises where they feel like they don't belong in one place or another because that's where I have a lot of experience.

Peggy: She has not come to a distinct answer about her cultural identity because she realizes all her cultures are equally important to her. Now she seeks to find what feels the most comfortable and enables her to celebrate all of her cultures.

Catherine: So there- I know that there are a lot of, say, British practices that I'm not comfortable with, and I'm sure there's quite a few Chinese practices that I also wouldn't be comfortable with. So just exploring both of my cultures and also my Canadian culture too, and just finding the right place for me that matches with my current, like, moral compass and ethics.

Conclusion

Peggy: Catherine's experience with generational trauma and her personal experience as a biracial person act as her motivation to connect with Chinese culture. She acquires her understanding of Chinese culture through her bond with her mother and

grandmother. Her biracial experience is, indeed, tough, but also guides her to self-acceptance and confidence in expressing her heritage cultures, leading her to the recognition of her place in the world. Her supportive parents offer a comfortable and safe environment for her identity navigation, which lights up her journey to integration. While everyone's experience of acculturation is different and given the complex nature of acculturation, I hope her story unveils some of the common challenges biracial people encounter when negotiating their cultural identity, and gives some ideas on how ethnically diverse individuals acculturate.

Peggy: I hope Catherine's story sheds light on the conversation about acculturation in people with multiple heritages and the complexity of acculturation. It is also important to reflect on our perspectives on culture and place emphasis on its multifaceted nature. Thanks for listening to today's episode, goodbye!

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