Cultural Identity Crisis: Can I Call Myself a Hong Konger?

Vivian Lee

ASIX 300A: Hong Kong Diaspora in Canada University of British Columbia

Dr. Benjamin Y. Cheung

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Introduction

The 2019 extradition bill erupted in a considerable series of protests in Hong Kong. This triggered the final straw for many Hongkongers, leading to a surge of asylum applications to other countries, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Taiwan, and Canada. Seeing this wave of immigration from Hong Kong reminded me of my parents. My parents immigrated here because of the handover of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to China in 1997, so I was born and raised in Vancouver. As a first-generation Canadian, I had never experienced the challenges my friends had. My racial identity and belonging were clear-cut with no ambiguity. Being a Canadian-born Chinese was more of a fact instead of a rumination. Along with my cultural identity plotted with aspects of Hong Kong my parents incorporated, I saw myself as a Hongkonger to a certain extent. My racial identity was simple, and it was so I thought until the cycles of turbulent clashes outpour every media platform that made me feel dejected seeing the place I considered my second home in horror. From the summer of 2019 onwards, something clicked but did not add up, opening this unknown perversive feeling of being lost in the translation of my Hong Kong cultural identity as a first-generation Canadian. In this paper, I will discuss how I navigated and came to terms with my ambivalent identity as a Canadian-born Chinese Hongkonger.

Characteristics of Hong Kong Culture in the Lived Experienced of Canadian Born Chinese

Acculturation is the process where migrants develop patterns of dominant culture while adjusting or blending traditions from their heritage background (Fuk et al., 2018). Having been born in Canada, my parents were not as traditional compared to my Canadian-born Chinese friends. Immigrant parents who assimilated more into mainstream culture are found to possess more values and practices that are closely aligned with Western society (Huang et al., 2018). My

parents embraced a cross-cultural adaptation of mainstream and heritage culture in our lifestyle. Specifically, they provided authoritative parenting by setting high expectations and support. However, as they also identified strongly with their heritage culture, cultural socialization was exhibited throughout my development. Cultural socialization refers to the transmission of cultural knowledge parents socialized their children in facilitating their understanding and sense of belonging as ingroup members (Wang et al., 2015). With recognizing how salient cultural agents of Western culture encompass my development in multiple facets, such as schools, peers, and society, my parents captured their efforts to maintain heritage culture through our interactions and primarily at home. Apart from speaking Cantonese at home, specks of Hong Kong (HK) were incorporated within my development. I grew up watching TVB drama series such as *Heart of Greed* (溏心風暴) and variety series like *The Super Trio* (獎門人). The café culture where, as a family, we would go to Hong Kong Cafe (茶餐廳) on the weekends to get our Satay Beef Noodle with Hong Kong-style milk tea for breakfast or a set meal of baked pork chop rice with lemon iced tea. The nutritious soups (老火湯) that took hours of preparation to boil down into essence for us to gulp down in just a few minutes. Although I have mentioned three representations of HK integration in my upbringing, the list is endless. For this reason, I saw myself as a Hongkonger despite not having been born or raised in Hong Kong.

My Hong Kong Diasporic Melancholy as a Canadian

Diasporic guilt describes the invariant feeling of culpability that expatriates experience when unfortunate circumstances are experienced back in their homeland. The term diasporic guilt was first introduced to me when I took Ben's ACAM 320B in the spring of 2022. One of the readings I heartfully resonated quite deeply back then resurfaced in this course. The indelible

phrase, Yam (2021) wrote “Am I a true Hongkonger? If I had not put my body on the line, do I still qualify as a Hongkonger?” I ruminate from time to time. If individuals born in Hong Kong but settled elsewhere were having difficulties coming to terms with their demonym, then what right do I, as a Chinese-born Canadian, to say I am also a Hongkonger? Re-reading Yam’s (2021) reflection flashbacked scenes of clashes I saw broadcasted in the summer of 2019 from Hong Kong and started the ignition of the self-reproach I cycled myself back then. Knowing how the majority of protestors were around the same age cohort as me, preparing to fight for freedom rather than submersing themselves in career development. For that reason, I enabled my sense of culpability to devour me, intending to share a measure of heartbreak Hongkongers felt. The series of hypothetical ifs and what ifs reformed once I was reminded of the concealed privilege I lived, yet only emerged when tragedies happened back in the motherland. Following how strongly I resonated with Yam’s (2021) diasporic voice back in 2022, I articulate my feelings with my parents, expressing the conflicts of distress, confusion and self-accusation I had. Not only did this interaction foster our parent-child relationship, but the feelings of oppression we all conveyed helped to mediate one another’s diasporic guilt. This reminded me of how this circumstance was foreign for all of us, and their assimilation in dealing with their dual identity was a first for them. Leading me up to this point, the reason why I enrolled in ASIX 300A is to learn more about the Hong Kong Diaspora in Canada and resolve the ambiguity hiding behind the term “Hongkonger” against me.

This course educated me in the context of both cultures, Hong Kong and Canada. It introduced the intersections of social issues affecting the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada that stem from the historical context of migration and cultural adjustment from Hong Kong to Canada. Most importantly, the complex aspects of identity that surround the Hong Kong diaspora

in Canada in the context of culture, politics, and society. For example, learning about the astronaut families that I have not experienced but know families who have been through this. Astronaut families refer to the separation between parents where one (usually the mother) takes care of the child in the new country while the other (usually the father) stays behind in the original country to work (Tsong et al. 2021). Although there are presumed long-term benefits in terms of education and finances with this family structure, it proposes challenges in marital stress and the child's cultural identity. Since they have trouble connecting to the mainstream and heritage culture, it often resulting them losing association with their heritage culture. Through gaining such insight from the diversity of experiences Canadian-born Chinese can face, I realized I was gatekeeping myself. Despite experiencing my diasporic self once again from Yan (2021), I started to self-accept that I am a Hongkonger. Instead of deriving my cultural belongingness on things I can not change (i.e., not being born in Hong Kong or my absence during the summer of 2019), I became aware of how my proactiveness to care, understand and interact culturally represents my sense of entitlement to be a Hongkonger. I believe my conversational proficiency in Cantonese reflects being Cantonese enough for CBCs, as I have never been called a "juksing" or "banana" before. For example, the two forms of "thank you" in Cantonese are 唔該 and 多謝.

Hongkongers have a cultural understanding of when to use which characters depending on the circumstances. They convey different meanings despite how both characters translate the same in English. 唔該 is used to express courtesy to someone for their action (i.e., favour, service or attention), while 多謝 is used to thank someone for giving you something (i.e., gift). Despite how both words translate the same in English, they convey different meanings and are interchangeable in Cantonese. These notions of linguistic properties convey the speaker's

cultural understanding to others who share the same language. Language is an ever-evolving entity that is influenced by various aspects of culture. For instance, the use of slang transcends boundaries and permeates discourse. Despite the distance, knowing contemporary Hong Kong slang reflects one's understanding of Hong Kong culture. My ability to converse socially in Cantonese has earned my ingroup membership amongst Hongkongers. Proving to myself that I am Hongkongese enough to be identified as a Hongkonger.

Conclusion

It was a mental battle to navigate and reconcile my Canadian-born Chinese Hongkonger identity. To diasporic Hongkongers settled abroad, the result perceived directly impacts many as "the dissonance of inhabiting two realities and the inability to relay our grief [takes] a physical and emotional toll." (Yam, 2021). While growing up, my parents incorporated characteristics of Hong Kong culture that facilitated me into forming such a close association with my cultural identity. However, after experiencing an extensive sense of guilt and helplessness from perceiving what had happened in Hong Kong, it numbed and questioned my connection with Hong Kong as a Canadian. One might ask why, and so did I, until I learnt the embodied emotions I had were diasporic guilt. As I studied Yam's (2021) diasporic melancholy once again, the indescribable shame from my first read lingered as extricating scenes of despair so vividly coursed. The obscurities in my identity took an emotional toll on me and prompted me to gain a deeper understanding of the intersections within the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada. This resulted in coming to terms with my identity as a Hong Kong diasporic Canadian. I know I will continue to have moments of diaspora, but this is normal because it signifies how much I care. I will be visiting Hong Kong since the pandemic, and I am intrigued to see how I will react after accepting myself and whether it enchants Home Kong as it has always done in the past.

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