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# RACE AND ETHNICITY

Culture, identity and representation

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Stephen Spencer

- The 'subversive potential once invested in notions of hybridity has been subjected to pre-millennial downsizing. Indeed hybridity has spun through the fashion cycle so rapidly that it has come out the other end looking wet and soggy' (Mercer 2000: 510).
- Modood comments that the reaction against essentialism can lead to excesses in the other direction that are 'inherently destructive' because 'Reconciled to multiplicity as an end in itself, its vision of multiculturalism is confined to personal lifestyles and cosmopolitan consumerism and does not extend to the state, which it confidently expects to wither away' (Modood 2000: 178).
- Valdaverde (1995) commented in a book review that Gilroy and other hybridity writers' discussions of hybridity tend to be weakened by a 'romanticism of the in-between that is perhaps more politically palatable but no more theoretically sound than the romanticism of identity politics'.
- Hybridity fails to address adequately the social and political continuities and transformations that underpin individual and collective action in the real world (May 2000: 134). Indeed, in the real world, May, citing Ahmad (1995: 14), suggests political agency is historically anchored to time place and sense of 'stable commitment to one's class or gender or nation.'

These theorists draw up a reality checklist, warning against self-congratulatory discourses of hybridity which, carried away by a sort of anti-essentialist euphoria seem to float away from the realities of everyday material existence in multicultural societies. However, as Les Back reminds us, at some level hybridity is a fact. By using the term 'the fact of hybridity', he is insisting that hybridity is not a mere intellectual construct but reflects the truth that human lives are inseparably intertwined, there are overlapping histories that make the total separation of the self an impossibility (Back 2000: 450). The following conversations present some of the real-life experiences of living 'between cultures', not as a romanticised concept but as a challenging and at times painful negotiation between attitudes and values that are resistant to merging.

### BRITISH-BORN CHINESE (BBC)



The experience of hybridity, as we have explained it, relates to the sense of dislocation. This sense of being in between cultures is a complex one, and as can be seen, relates also to generational, gender and class differences. Mark Quah's interview demonstrates the manner in which individuals attempt to navigate their place in the culture, drawing on some concepts that they feel reflect their developing identity and dis-identification with others who may seem to trap them into stereotypical roles.

### British-Born Chinese, border crossings. Interviews by Mark Quah

This case study is based upon interviews with British-Born Chinese people. It brings attention to the tenacity used to negotiate cultural boundaries and the confusion that ensues when boundaries are regarded as closed or impassable. The interviews were conducted with the aim of uncovering shared experiences amongst second-generation BBCs that had, up to this point, often been hidden from view even amongst and between British Chinese people themselves.

Win lives in Sheffield. He is twenty years old, a full-time student and also works part-time in his parents' take-away. He attends Chinese school where he learns how to speak, read and write Cantonese

MARK: Do you think it's a positive thing, having a British perspective and a Chinese perspective? Or do you find it confusing?

WIN: Probably confusing at times[,] because you don't know where you fit in[,] it's difficult[,] You need to find an answer for yourself[I think] where do you think you belong[?] Which is right for you[,] and if you think that's right you're just gonna go for it [..] Like where do you belong[?] where's your identity[?] Is it disappeared[?] It's like disappearing in the western world isn't it[?] The more you think about it [..] It's like the next generation and the next generation [..] and get worse [..] like Americans they've lost it[.]. Like whenever I go on holiday it's like[,] or any BBC[,] the first thing they want to do is eat British food[,] isn't it[?] Not Chinese food[,] so where's the first place they look? [..] McDonald's[,] and they want to eat it everyday[,] like my brother[,] he just eats McDonald's, McDonald's, McDonald's when he could eat something else[,] but he doesn't want to 'cos he wouldn't know it [..] his taste [is] all British.

Will is a student. He grew up in Manchester and works part-time in his parents' restaurant during the weekends and holiday time.

WILL: If you're in a Chinese community[,] you just naturally go into a sort of Chinese community state[,] a Chinese state[,] when you're with English people in English society you just act more English type[,] So it's not really I can do this in a Chinese community and then I can change over to that in an English community[,] it just comes naturally to you.

At the time of this interview Eve was twenty years old and a full-time student. As she described it, there was a sizable Chinese community in the places where she grew up.

EVE: I'm very much part of this British society but also I very strongly identify with being Chinese and more specifically with Hong Kong [...] you feel like you don't properly belong[] like you belong to either set British or Chinese[] but they don't see you as part of them so [...]

MARK: WIn[] what's life at home[] Did your parents stress to you you're Chinese[] Act this way [... ] or you're Chinese you shouldn't act that way []?

WIn: At home like your parents try to bring you into Chinese but if you don't want to learn they can't make you[] basically it's for yourself to sort of like judge if you want to learn like[] When you're like brought up accustomed to all these things isn't it[] You're brought up to like[] say dating they prefer you to marry your own race isn't it[]

MARK: yeah[] my mum says that [...]

WIn: [... ] whereas if you don't they'll be disappointed but when you have kids like they'll probably forgive you innit[]?

MARK: Yeah

WIn: In Hong Kong you get called banana boy[] [*laughs*]

MARK: One thing with me is one girl from Hong Kong she was speaking to me and she's speaking English with a Chinese accent[] and fair enough it's not her first language[] I don't take the piss [...]

WIn: [... ] yeah we don't take the piss [...]

MARK: [... ] and I say a few words in Cantonese to her, she laughs, yeah

WIn: That's [... ] the way it is[]

MARK: sometimes that makes me feel like giving up why should I make an effort if [... ]?

WIn: You can laugh at [them], if you want [...]

MARK: it's not me though [...]

WIn: 'Very good!' [*Chinese accent*] 'Very good!' [... ] We don't really do that though[] we're less likely to take the piss out of them [...]

MARK: There's something strange[] here we get taken the piss by the English guys and Chinese but we don't take the piss out of either, yeah [...]

WIn: Both of them think they're better than us [...]

MARK: Did your parents say to you be proud to be Chinese[]?

WIn: Yeah they say it's good to be Chinese [-] I think it's good to be Chinese but there's some[] I know some[] Chinese people that reject [... ] they

don't like being Chinese and stuff like that[] which is weird if you're brought up that way[]

MARK: What does being Chinese mean to you[]?

WIn: Everything basically[] life[] the way I study[] the way I talk[] characteristics[] everything – so I'm proud to be Chinese[]

Mark and his respondents have a strong if conflicted sense of identity and are conscious of navigating between cultures. The middle ground is hard to find as it is constantly clawed back by each culture. Terms like 'banana boy' may be used by some who are grounded in the home culture. In Hong Kong to suggest that the hybrid individual has a veneer an outward appearance of 'Chineseness' which, if scrutinised will reveal a white English core. However, the social mores that the Hong Kong Chinese person aspires to may, it is suggested, be those very white European attributes and cultural knowledges that the above respondents cannot disguise.

The next interview further strengthens this assessment of hybrid identity. Stuart is a British Born Chinese in his twenties. Articulating a strong sense of his Chinese identity, which endures despite his Englishness, Stuart recognises identity as almost physically ascribed, similar to the way in which Mauss talks of the habitus as internalised dispositions or bodily orientations (Mauss 1979). He also notes the automatic nature of racisms that employ well-worn stereotypes and assumptions about Chinese people.

## BOX 8.2 BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

SS: First could you tell us a little about yourself Stuart?

STUART: OK, I was born in England in Leicester, spent most of my life in the UK, went over to Hong Kong when I was about seven for a year so I adapted to the culture then, but most of my life I've been in the UK. But I feel that – even though I've only lived in Hong Kong for a year, in my heart I still feel Chinese. Even though my behaviour is very English – I still feel inside my heart I'm very Chinese. I have friends in Hong Kong who are totally Chinese, when they come to England they want to be English – even though their experience of life is Chinese – they want to be English, whereas me I'm opposite: I'm totally English behaviour and in my heart it's very Chinese.

SS: That's interesting then that there are these different aspirations that people from Hong Kong have got, the English side of it – they've got the colonial thing – and you've been over here [...]

STUART: [...] yeah I'm the opposite [...]

SS: [...] you're looking over that way [...]

STUART: [...] but I strongly believe that this is me[] I'm one individual[] everyone's different [-] OK my experiences have brought me the person I am[] yeah[] even though I was born in Hong Kong or China I would be the same[] but even so my environment would have shaped me to a degree to the person I am [-] my inner self [-] I still believe would have been the same but different like[] maybe slight differences outside in what I perceive[] but inside my heart I still believe I'd be a Chinese human being[]

SS: Have your parents had a big influence on the fact do you think[]? I mean do they keep the cultural traditions going quite strongly[]?

STUART: I personally think that Chinese as a whole whether you're born in the UK[] America[] Hong Kong[] China[] the values[] morals are very deep rooted[] it's passed on from generation to generation[] That's the bottom line[] the bottom line[] the basis for Chinese humanity[] the bottom values and like[] the cornerstone to build it on[] So whether you're born in UK[] Hong Kong[] China[] you still have this deep-rooted tradition[] culture which is embedded[] It's hard to like to disassemble[] it's deep rooted[] [*Makes building motions with his hands simulating bricks and mortar*]

SS: Yeah [...] so presumably you've learnt some of the languages which embody the culture as well[] I mean having to learn that [-] I mean that embodies all of the cultural traditions presumably[]?

STUART: It's true what you say because like in psychology[] I can't remember who it is now [-] they say the language itself will shape the personality[] We have words like rice that is cooked and uncooked[] you only have rice (you don't know if it's cooked or uncooked)[] Your mum's brother or your dad's brother there's different words for it you just say 'uncle what can it be[]' So we have more different sorts of words that can add to the meanings and that [-] icy[] rainy cold [-] we have different words and that [-] so obviously that's going to affect your vocabulary and your knowledge of how you say things in life[] But that's just a part of it [-] I think mostly it's to do with the individual[] yourself[] you as a person[] [...] It's like with me my experiences in the UK people say that there's no racism[] Then in the end I believe I'm Chinese[] whether I'm black or white[] I believe that we're human beings and we live in this world

and you cannot possibly as a human being put yourself above another human being [-] not everyone is like that some people are more narrow-minded[] some are like, I don't know[] disturbed in the head[] I don't know[] but some people are like that[] In this world we are seen as one thing [-] we can't just get on with one another [-] people just resent you jealousy[] envy[] I don't know[] it's just human nature to be like that[] irrespective of your colour[] So in my upbringing [-] I went to school in England [-] but lucky for me I had brothers and they all just assume that because your brothers do kung fu that you do kung fu[] It's like stereotypical thing about Chinese [...]

SS: [...] What[]? The kung fu[]?

STUART: Yeah[] it's always the case[] always the case [...]

SS: Do you ever feel that you're stuck in between two cultures?

STUART: Yeah yeah [-] because people always assume black white[] black white[] it's not[] The way I look at it is black[] green[] none white and white[] ethnic minorities and white[] On the exterior say it's cosmopolitan[] equal opportunities but in the heart[] deep rooted[] there's still that resentment[] that hatred for colours[] that's the bottom line[] OK [...] First, I see myself as a human being then I see myself as an Oriental[] Far East[] not an Asian[] Far East – Oriental[] Middle East is like Arabs and that[] Then I see myself as an ethnic minority[] So I see myself as a human being[] Chinese[] oriental[] ethnic minority[] then coloured[] non-white[] So when I see an Oriental with a white European[] an Asian[] a black African[] I don't give a shit[] if they're happy they're happy[]

(Recorded 16 February 2005)

Stuart's identification with a primordial sense of Chineseness comes through strongly, a foundation that is structured in the language but arguably, as Stuart says, goes further, suggesting an embodied sense of being Chinese.

Many migrants are only short-term: they travel for work or education and return after a period of months or years to their countries. However, this temporary immersion in a culture so different may, at times, bring about transformations. Inhabiting the 'diaspora space' may enable unique perspectives and comparisons for both the visitors and the people they associate with. This is certainly the case in the next interview in which a Mexican subject, Diego, who was a research student in the UK and, after several years, developed a critical detachment. There are several points of comparison made throughout the exchange and Diego was able to recognise flaws with his country (as well as with the UK) despite an obvious pride and a deep-seated sense of the country as a moulding influence. Diego