

## Deconstructing Ethnic Identity of Chinese Children in Northern Ireland

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**Key words:** ethnic Chinese, cultural narrative, disposition, BOURDIEU, habitus

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on two groups of sub-ethnic Chinese children respectively migrating from Mainland China and Hong Kong to Northern Ireland. It examines their cultural narratives surrounding topics of their country of origin, their adopted society in Northern Ireland. The paper analyses not only the surface narratives themselves, but also the social, cultural and political context in which such dispositional narratives were nourished and made possible. Theoretically, the author uses BOURDIEU's concept of "habitus" as the analytical tool to interpret and explain such narrative dispositions. Methodologically, the author uses in-depth interviewing and observations to achieve a more objective and overall understanding of their cultural narratives.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the ethnic experience of Chinese secondary school children living in Northern Ireland. I divide these ethnic Chinese children in two sub-groups, namely, one with parents originating from Hong Kong and the other with parents originating from Mainland China. The division as such is not to represent a fact but to be used as a starting point. The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether or not these apparently "Chinese" children make sense of their ethnic experiences in disparate ways, and if so, how. In other words, the paper mainly looks at the structural differences between the two sub-ethnic Chinese groups now settling down in Northern Ireland. The paper tries to account for such cultural specificity and heterogeneity, drawing upon BOURDIEU's concept of "habitus" (1990, 1991) and cultural theories regarding the identity issues in the sense of negotiating ethnic identity according to individual experiences. [1]

## 2. Research Background

Unlike the ethnic demography in England with ethnic Chinese as the smallest ethnic group compared with other Asian minorities, the Chinese community in Northern Ireland is the largest ethnic minority, and has a population of over eight thousand people (see HOLDER, 2003; also see the CHINESE WELFARE ASSOCIATION: ANNUAL REPORT 1998). A significant number of these are the younger generation of ethnic Chinese. Little however is known of the ethnic community, especially of the younger generation of this Chinese community in Northern Ireland. The reason I choose to compare the two sub-ethnic groups of the Chinese is the fact that there is already an established migration pattern of the Chinese community in Northern Ireland since the 1980s. The majority of this community either come from Hong Kong or from Mainland China, but their different geographical origins where political and social systems deviated and continue to deviate, their different dialects as well as their different purposes for migration to Northern Ireland account for their establishing separate sub-ethnic organisations within the Chinese community. Moreover, their different purposes for migration to Northern Ireland also affect them to develop their careers in disparate directions; hence, their social conditions differ. Given the past history of the colonial relationship between Hong Kong and the UK, most Hong Kong Chinese originally came to Northern Ireland to start their catering businesses. Later on, their families and relatives came over to join their businesses. The first flow of Hong Kong Chinese migrants to Northern Ireland began in the 1960s, then gradually increased over the decades. [2]

The majority of the Mainland Chinese migrants, however, came to Northern Ireland as students or researchers, which was a consequence of the "Open Policy" initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. Since then, hundreds of Mainland Chinese students have come over to the UK, including Northern Ireland nearly every year. Most of these students go back to China by the end of their courses, but some promising ones have managed to stay on in NI to pursue professional jobs. All these differences in geographical origin, in political and social background of their homeland, in reasons for migration as well as their setting up separate sub-ethnic organisations within the Chinese community in Northern Ireland, create an increasingly interesting social phenomenon among their younger generation. Therefore, this paper, motivated by such interesting phenomenon, focuses on the younger generation of the two disparate migrant Chinese groups in Northern Ireland to find out how the younger generation is affected by all these above-mentioned factors. [3]

## 3. Methodology and Method

Methodologically, the paper has adopted a semi-structured interviewing, in keeping with the current general tendency of cultural studies. On the one hand, the paper gives central prominence to the definitions, perspectives and voices of the children themselves by conducting in-depth and informal interviews. The paper also places its analytical focus on these interviews and analyse them qualitatively. On the other hand, the paper has not designed, conducted and

interpreted these interviews out of context; rather it has conducted participant observation, taken field notes and interviewed their parents as well. This whole process continued for two years. Thus in the present analysis, the paper draws upon this contextual knowledge while making sense of and accounting for the children's talk. This exercise includes paying close attention to the children's immediate circumstances, their parental occupations and their general social and cultural conditions. [4]

As the aim of this project is to reach an in-depth understanding of the two sub-ethnic groups of Chinese children in Northern Ireland, the author has observed and interviewed 20 ethnic Chinese children in Northern Ireland (as shown in the following Tables):

No.	Name	Sex	Age	First Language	Parents' Profession	Birth Place	Origin
1	YW	F	13	Mandarin	Academic	M. China	M. China
2	YN	M	13	Mandarin	Academic	M. China	M. China
3	JS	F	13	Mandarin	Engineer	M. China	M. China
4	CC	M	14	Mandarin	Academic	M. China	M. China
5	SA	F	14	Mandarin	Academic	M. China	M. China
6	PH	M	12	Mandarin	Engineer	M. China	M. China
7	James	M	14	Mandarin	Academic	M. China	M. China
8	Ian	M	15	Mandarin	Academic/ Manager	M. China	M. China
9	Hans	M	12	Mandarin	Engineer	M. China	M. China
10	JW	M	13	Mandarin	IT professional	M. China	M. China

Table 1: Mainland Chinese children

No.	Name	Sex	Age	First Language	Parents' Profession	Birth Place	Origin
1	Mel	F	13	Cantonese	Take- away	UK	HK
2	Helen	F	12	Cantonese	Take- away	UK	HK
3	Kai	M	15	Cantonese	Take-away	HK	HK
4	KV	M	12	Cantonese	Health society	UK	HK
5	Ann	F	12	Cantonese	Restaurant	UK	HK
6	Jane	F	14	Cantonese	Shop	HK	HK
7	Vin	M	12	Cantonese	Restaurant	UK	HK
8	AX	M	13	Cantonese	Take-away	UK	HK
9	Joe	M	13	Cantonese	Restaurant	HK	HK
10	John	M	13	Cantonese	Take-away	UK	HK

Table 2: Hong Kong Chinese children [5]

This particular age group of 12-15 years was decided upon because this is the age range of the first part of their secondary school years. Since the individual experiences embodying self-perceptions and identities are highly complex phenomena (i.e. context dependent and historically and culturally embedded), I have kept all the detailed accumulated documentation (at least two interviews from each interviewee including detailed observation notes, research diaries) of the individual cases and interpret them against their specific life circumstances. Within the 20 children aged between 12 to 15 I have approached, my aim is to ensure that half are boys and half are girls and within this, half are from Mainland China origin (largely from professional family background, Mandarin speakers) and half are from Hong Kong origin (mainly from families with Chinese catering business, Cantonese speakers). This choice includes a diverse range of children in relation to the variables I mentioned earlier, i.e. difference in family situation, social condition as well as sub-cultural background. I have also included in-depth / intensive interviews with the parents of these sampled children as crucially relevant background knowledge of the sampled children. The number of interviewed parents is 35, sometimes both parents of the child have chosen to attend the interview and other times, only one parent could afford the time to be interviewed. Observations of these sampled children as well as their parents on both formal and informal occasions are being taken into account. Interviewing and observing parents are essential means to further understand the children's discursive backgrounds and specific social conditions. This is because children's behaviour and actions today reflect their experiences from an earlier stage of life, which can influence profoundly the patterning of their conducts at later stages of life (see ELIAS & SCOTSON, 1994, p.xxxvi). [6]

I have to explain however, that the current paper has never meant to divide their professions as clearly as this, i.e. the Mainland Chinese children are

predominantly from professional / academic family background, while Hong Kong children are mainly from families with Chinese catering business. In fact, I have tried for nearly three years in vain to find out any non-catering professionals from the Hong Kong group, the result is either those people from Hong Kong origin with non-catering professions have very small children (below 5 years of age), or they are still single with no children yet. Hence, it could not meet the data requirement of the current research. The access to the children was negotiated via a number of Chinese organisations in Northern Ireland, including the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (CCC), the Chinese Welfare Association (CWA), the Mandarin Speakers' Association (MSA), the Chinese language school, my existing contacts and the mainstream schools as well as other networks in Northern Ireland. [7]

#### **4. Research Findings: Differences Between the Two Young Sub-ethnic Chinese Groups**

As the analysis data (see the [Appendix](#)) show, children from Mainland China are disposed to talk negatively about Mainland China while children from Hong Kong background tend to express their warm feelings toward Hong Kong. I will briefly reflect how the Mainland Chinese children have attempted to set up a psychological distance between Northern Ireland where they are being repositioned now and Mainland China where they were born. To highlight the disparity between the two groups of children, I list below the words they have used regarding their homeland (to quote just a few, for detailed interview transcript, please see the [Appendix](#)), starting from the Mainland Chinese group:

- "It's dirty, crowded, too warm and full of mosquitoes."
- "I just don't want to be there [in China]."
- "I know I'm Chinese, but I know more about here [Northern Ireland], friends, language and culture here."
- "I feel I belong here [Northern Ireland]. ... I feel British."
- "They [children in China] would see me as a foreigner coming back from a foreign country."
- "The important part of my life is shaped here [Northern Ireland], not in China."  
[8]

Whereas children from Hong Kong background habitually talk about Hong Kong positively as shown in the following:

- "I prefer Hong Kong, lots of new features, restaurants ..."
- "It is boring here [Northern Ireland], there's nothing to do. If you're in Hong Kong, you can go out, shops are open 24 hours."
- "[going back to Hong Kong] is just like a change and whenever you get on the plane, somebody changes, too, it's like you switch TV channels."

- "More stuff to do in Hong Kong than here [Northern Ireland], more fun, because Hong Kong is much bigger than here, and there is much more to do there than here."
- "There's not an awful lot of name-calling [in Hong Kong], because there are not many racist people." [9]

All these are their respective general attitudes toward their regions of origin between the sampled children from Mainland China and their counterparts of Hong Kong origin. The data also indicate a difference of attitudes toward learning ethnic Chinese language between the two groups. The interviewed Mainland Chinese children tend to emphasise the difficulties of learning Chinese language in Northern Ireland, even though they come to Northern Ireland much later than the children from Hong Kong, most of who in fact were born either in Northern Ireland or in England. The interviewed children from Hong Kong, however, hold relatively positive attitudes towards learning Chinese language as a necessity to communicate with their parents who speak little English. In addition, many of these children realise that learning Chinese is to prepare for their future career in Hong Kong or Mainland China if situation requires. Some of the Hong Kong Chinese children told me, during my participant observation, that the reason they could speak good Chinese despite the fact that they were born in Northern Ireland or England, is that their parents could not speak English. [10]

Most importantly, the data have shown that the Mainland Chinese school children have the collective disposition of minimising or even denying racist bullying. They use their discursive strategies which correlate with those of their parents, while the Hong Kong Chinese children tend to stress racism as a major problem for them in Northern Ireland, a discursive habitus which corresponds with that of their Hong Kong parents. In a way, the disadvantaged social conditions of these Hong Kong Chinese children (i.e. with a different lifestyle determined by running Chinese take-away shops or restaurants), make them an easy target for abuse from local drunkards and racist bullies. It explains why the Hong Kong Chinese children experience more direct racial abuse than their Mainland Chinese counterparts. Accordingly, the Mainland Chinese children, situated in comparatively more advantaged social conditions with well-educated parents knowing where and how to get access to cultural resources are less exposed to direct racist abuse. At least, they try to look beyond what they consider "vicious circle" of thinking along the line of racial discrimination. The following table may better summarise these findings:

Characteristics	Mainland China	Hong Kong
Family background	Professional / academic	Family catering business / shops
Attitude toward homeland	Overall negative / critical about life in China	Overall positive appraisal talking about life in HK
Mother-tongue maintenance	Passive: many of them don't go to the Chinese school	Active: more of them attend the Chinese school
Racial experiences in N.I.	Minimise racist bullying: Most of them say it's normal and not a big deal, or simply deny it	Admit racist bullying: most of them talk about it openly and strongly. Some also say it's not a big deal
Future aspirations in N.I.	Optimistic about their future in NI and not willing to go back to China for education and career	Pessimistic about their future in NI and are willing to go back to HK for a career

Table 3: Overall findings of the two sub-ethnic groups [11]

Given the qualitative nature of this research, these findings may not be representative of all the Chinese migrants respectively from Hong Kong and Mainland China due to the data constraints. However, the sample analysed have at least suggested several explanations for the split or differences between the two sub-groups originated from socially and politically different regions, as I will discuss further in the following section. [12]

#### 4.1 Why are these children telling different stories?

The data has shown a clear similarity between the children's discourses and those of their parents. The children's discourses are closely related to their specific social conditions characterised by their parents, parental occupations and their family environment. The key point is that there is an internalisation going on within the family context, and such an internalisation has been represented as "habits", a taken-for-granted ways of thinking about and acting upon the social world (see BOURDIEU, 1990, 1993; CONNOLLY, 2004). As BOURDIEU (1993, p.86) explained: [13]

The habitus, as the word implies, is that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions. So the term constantly reminds us that it refers to something historical, linked to individual history, and that it belongs to a genetic mode of thought, as opposed to essentialist modes of thought. [14]

Thus, the data can be best analysed by BOURDIEU's concept of habitus which stresses the fact that the internalised modes of thought or habits mould and shape our behaviour. As can be seen, the outcome in this case is that both

children and parents (whether they are from Mainland China or Hong Kong), hold beliefs and discursive strategies that are strongly similar in their respective interviews. For instance, in line with their children's denial of or minimising racism, many parents from Mainland China have expressed the opinion of "open-mindedness": as LM said, "I think we adults should teach our kids and tell them to be open-minded. We can't get stuck in this narrow alley, thinking that we are foreigners and that's why they bully us." Interestingly, LM is not alone in holding such an opinion, which is shared by many within this group, as I have observed during our informal social gatherings. [15]

Although BOURDIEU's concept of habitus has received some criticism for over-emphasising social structure and neglecting social agency (GIROUX, 1983; JENKINS, 1982), nevertheless, as BOURDIEU argued on many occasions, the concept of habitus is not to suggest determinism or a dead-end, but rather it only explains how an individual's past history and experience can influence or affect one's current state of mind and behaviour (see BOURDIEU, 1992, pp.132-133). The social structure implied in the concept of habitus is meant to be an *open structure*. "Being the product of history, it [habitus] is an *open system of dispositions* that is constantly subjected to experiences, and accordingly constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structure" (ibid., p.133). My understanding and interpretation of this is that such a structure does not exist by itself, but rather it is created by social agents, and also maintained and modified by social agents. We cannot overlook the power of social agents; neither can we deny the power of social structures and social networks that are crucially important to our everyday life. Structure, in GIDDENS' words, is both the medium and the outcome of the day-to-day conduct in which actors engage (see 1987, p.8). As GIDDENS (1984, p.25) argues:

"Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both enabling and constraining. This, of course, does not prevent the structured properties of social systems from stretching away, in time and space, beyond the control of individual actors." [16]

With the concept of habitus in mind, to better understand children, it becomes highly essential to relate to their past history, especially to their specific family culture and conditions. Since the interviews conducted have been designed in such a way that the interviewees could choose their own preferred topics to talk about during our interviews, all the empirical data do not follow exactly the same patterns or cover the same topics. Again, to highlight the disparity between the two adult groups, let me make a similar list as I did with the children of some of the words used by the parents from both sides when they talk about Northern Ireland (for detailed interview data, see the [Appendix](#)). Starting with the parents from Mainland China:



- "Here [in Northern Ireland] they [children] are learning the methods of solving problems, methods of thinking."
- "In Northern Ireland, teachers and schools encourage children to do things and develop their ability to search for knowledge by themselves."
- "I feel free here [in Northern Ireland]."
- "Their [Northern Ireland] legal system and moral education are excellent. ... They try their best to educate children not to discriminate against anybody."
- "Bullying happens everywhere; there is no exception. It's part of growing up and it's very normal."
- "Here [Northern Ireland] you have laws to protect you, saying you can't discriminate against foreigners." [17]

From the Hong Kong parents, we have:

- "What makes my children most unhappy here [in Northern Ireland] is the racial problem ... The other day on my way to the school to pick up my youngest son, I saw some local kids throwing stones at him."
- "Even though we are adults, we are treated just the same sometimes by the local people. ... We've loads of such experiences, we feel very uncomfortable."
- "The area where we live is not a good one; the children in our neighbourhood very often call them [my children] names. They are very racist."
- "I hope they [my children] will go back to Hong Kong or China, because we are Chinese ... Our job opportunity here [Northern Ireland] is naturally smaller than the local people."
- "My nephew born and brought up in the UK with a very good university degree still couldn't find any suitable jobs here [Northern Ireland], so he went back to Hong Kong and got a job there."
- "As soon as they [my children] get used to the habit and rhythm in Hong Kong, they will very soon adapt to the life there [HK]." [18]

The contrast above is pretty clear. Among other things, the interviewed group of Mainland Chinese parents apparently have chosen to talk about things they are more concerned about, and tend to be more aware of the detailed differences between the two educational systems (China and Northern Ireland) than the interviewed group of Hong Kong parents. Such concern about education also has to do with the recent government policy in China: those who hold qualified foreign degrees will be allocated with better employment positions when they return to China. Since the UK and the US are the leading countries in education, degrees from the universities of these countries and of any rank are highly valued in Mainland China and tend to be considered more valuable than those attained in China for successful market placement (WONG, 1992; ZHOU, 1998). With this in mind, a Western educational qualification is of great significance both for themselves and for their children. [19]

Hence, when these Mainland Chinese parents talk about the advantages of the educational system in Northern Ireland, they are comparing the detailed teaching methods (e.g. the specific ways of teaching children mathematics), between the two educational systems in Northern Ireland (or the UK in general) and China. Most of the Mainland Chinese parents have mentioned the fact that the local (Northern Irish) teachers teach children the basic logic and concept of mathematics while teachers in China demand children to learn mathematics by rote. For instance, both LM and SZP talked about how they were impressed by what their children were being taught at the local schools in Northern Ireland, specifically the methods to do research. As LM said,

"when I read his (her son's) lecture notes about how to do a research project, steps 1, 2, 3, I was so impressed, because I never knew about these research methods when I was in China until I started doing my PhD here (Northern Ireland). But they learnt it already when they were still in primary schools." [20]

The fact that these parents are able to compare teaching methods in such detail also reflects their own cultural capital, i.e. being well educated and having good educational qualifications and academic experiences. As such, the more they compare, the more they are convinced about the educational advantages in Northern Ireland, and the less drive they have to go back to their own country of origin, for the sake of their children at least. [21]

Having gone through the process from comparison to conclusion, the parents decide that Northern Ireland is a child-friendly learning environment, compared with Mainland China. However, their determination to enable their children to enjoy such a learning environment and finish their education here apparently would be preconditioned by their own professional success in Northern Ireland. That is, they have to work extremely hard to guarantee such intentions. Moreover, their past experiences in China and problems characterised by frequent political movements, rigid educational system and complex social relations / connections which often go hand in hand with corruption and bribery, further strengthen their determination to stay away from Mainland China. As such, these Mainland Chinese parents' mental activities are subconsciously reflected through their everyday discourses and actions, which gradually influence their children over time. When the Mainland Chinese children express their unwillingness to go back to China or when they minimise the racist bullying in Northern Ireland, we see the effect of such influence: i.e. the children are at least making use of the information regarding situations in China that they hear so frequently from their parents. These children have already internalised such negative attitudes and discursive strategies over the years from their parents. The dispositions they have acquired from their parents over the years are both durable and transposable (BOURDIEU, 1977, p.82). This is how and why we see such a close similarity between the parents and the children as shown in the data. [22]

The interviewed Hong Kong parents on the other hand, are mostly less educated compared with those parents interviewed from Mainland China, therefore, they are not able to compare the two educational systems (i.e. Hong Kong and

Northern Ireland) in such great detail. All they can or tend to do, however, is to compare how much less homework their children bring back home here in Northern Ireland than that in Hong Kong, or that the teachers are polite and patient, things that they can see and feel. Accordingly, apart from their hope that their children should do well in school in order to get out of their family catering business in the future, they do not have many cultural resources and detailed strategies to help their children. It is observed that parents from both Hong Kong and Mainland China are fully aware of the importance of educational investment, nevertheless, the parents from Mainland China, given their academic or professional positions, know the "rules of the game" better and are more capable to provide for their children with intellectual insight, specific plans, detailed methods and all sorts of cultural resources. Having said that, the Hong Kong parent interviewees are more business-minded. They are more sensitive about the changing economic environments for their business competitiveness and vulnerability in Northern Ireland. They foresee more potential racial problems for their children when they grow up in Northern Ireland: i.e. failure in job-hunting due to racial discrimination. Since the parents from Hong Kong have been here in Northern Ireland much longer than their counterpart group from Mainland China and they have seen and experienced more direct racial problems in their everyday life, they are more ready to prepare their children for developing their career back in Hong Kong or even in Mainland China. This also explains why children from Hong Kong background are more worried about their future job-hunting in Northern Ireland due to racial discrimination. [23]

Overall, the interviewed parents from Hong Kong origin are more driven by economic well being and material products (i.e. nice cars and big houses), which to them is the major benchmark for their achievement. Although at this point, there is no clear-cut difference between the two sub-ethnic groups (both groups are perceived to be materially driven but only to different degrees), the Mainland Chinese group however, is more motivated by their social status and more enthusiastic in seeking intellectual achievement and acknowledgement in a broader professional environment beyond the national boundaries. When the parents from Hong Kong origin chose to talk about their family problems, they considered me as a trustful friend with whom they could share their overwhelming concerns and frustrations. The fact that the Mainland Chinese parents did not choose to talk about their family problems nevertheless, does not mean that the parents from Mainland China have no family problems at all. As a keen observer of both groups for the past three years, I see no difference between them at this point. On the contrary, the Mainland Chinese families are undergoing more instability, given the fact that they came to Northern Ireland at a much later stage and their professional jobs are less secure compared with the Hong Kong parents who mostly have their own family businesses. The difference between them rather lies in the fact that the parents from Mainland China did not choose to talk about their "failure" or "weakness", which again might be interpreted as an intentional strategy to emphasise their overall positive appraisal of Northern Ireland. For both groups of parents, they all send their children to the Chinese school (some give up later for various reasons), but there is a clear difference between them regarding degrees of motivation and enthusiasm. The interviewed

parents from Hong Kong are more involved in the administrative bodies of the Chinese school and they volunteer and do administrative jobs there. They seriously want their children to master Chinese language for two practical reasons: 1) To be able to communicate at home with parents who speak little English and with relatives in Hong KONG; 2) To be prepared for their future business career that might need their Chinese language skill. [24]

The Mainland Chinese parent-interviewees, given the fact that their children came much later to Northern Ireland than their Hong Kong counterparts, are more concerned about their children's ability of catching up with English, the language which is perceived as a crucially important symbol for assimilation into the mainstream society (TONG, HONG, LEE, & CHIU, 1999). As many Mainland Chinese parents told me on different occasions, they do not expect their children to have a high proficiency of Chinese language, but it would be good enough if they could just speak and understand conversations with their relatives and friends in China. Other Mainland Chinese parents confessed to me that they come to Chinese school because this is the only time in a week when they could socialise with their own people in their own language. For these parents with highly professional jobs, they work with English most of the time and many of them, as I observe in many families, even speak English with their children at home as well. All these account for the different attitudes the children have shown toward their ethnic language maintenance. [25]

Despite the apparent differences between these two sub-ethnic groups, both groups share the sentiment of cultural alienation. The difference however, lies in how they express and explain such cultural alienation and to what extent. For instance, as I observe, parents from Mainland China tend to argue that this is determined by their own personality of being withdrawn and having no interest or no time in social life, etc. One parent from Mainland China told me that his daughter (SA) used to get lots of invitations to go out from her local English classmates, but since they as parents were not sure about what sort of friends she had, they used to refuse her demand to go out with them. Consequently, her friends stopped inviting her any more, saying "Oh, she is not allowed anyway." The implication of what this parent told me here is that this is their own problem they have to deal with, not the other way round. Such discursive strategies are evidently in line with those of their children's. On the other side, parents from Hong Kong origin have not shown any uneasiness while talking about their unpleasant experiences of being excluded or racially discriminated or helplessness in their everyday life in Northern Ireland, a discursive tendency that is also in correlation with what their children have said. Let me summarise the general differences of the two parent- groups in the following table:

Interview Topics	Parents from Mainland China	Parents from HK
Talking about education in N.I. and the UK in general	Very positive and overall appraisal about the educational system in N.I. or the UK	Not much of their chosen topic
Talking about ethnic isolation / racial problems in NI	Overall denial of racial problems and minimise ethnic isolation	Being critical about the racial problems in NI
Talking about their children's future	Considering not practical for their children to go back to China	Being pessimistic about the children's future in NI. and ready to prepare them to develop in HK
Effort of teaching children Chinese	Overall inactive, being more concerned about their children's English	Considering it very important for their children to learn Chinese. Most of them send their children to Chinese school

Table 4: Interview tops from parents of both groups [26]

#### 4.2 Deconstructing the generalised image

People tend to generalize ethnic minority people as one voice, one experience and one symbolic social background. For instance, ethnic minority Chinese in Britain is almost always equated with take-away and catering business. People outside of the Chinese community in the UK tend to take it for granted that the Chinese community in the UK is composed of workers or self-employed people in the restaurant trade. The presence of a growing number of Chinese professionals and their families, however, tends to be ignored. In fact, the process of identification and other-ness is more complex than we have imagined. The representation of the ethnic Chinese has to be related to the dimension of social background or class. The current research is therefore meant to deconstruct such stereotyped image of ethnic minority Chinese in Northern Ireland. As INGLIS (1998, pp.274-275) observes,

"[t]he diversity of interests and backgrounds, as well as personal competition, has made it difficult to develop an organizational structure acceptable to all, and to identify individuals able to represent, or speak on behalf of, the Chinese community as a whole." [27]

The single word "Chinese" can no longer convey a reality that continues to become increasingly pluralistic (TSENG, 2002; TU, 1994A; WANG, 1999; WANG, 1994). The complex combinations of sentiment of being excluded and included at the same time are evident in these ethnic minority children in my

research. Even when we come to an individual identity, that identity can be plural. As RUSHDI (1992, p.15) says, "our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools". Such complex constructions of identity coming from the ethnic minority children with variety of family background are not yet sufficiently represented. [28]

Unlike the obvious theme of racism in many existing literatures, one of the themes in my research interviews with the children, especially the Mainland Chinese group, comes up compellingly in a rather different form: "I don't see myself as different". It is always interesting to hear different voices in the same ethnic group; it is particularly the case if we can explain why there are different voices. The issue of identity in my research is more of a process of negotiations, a process where the meaning and desirability of social classifications are adopted and rejected. In BHABHA's words, it is "third space" (1990, p.211), meaning something in between, something different, something new and unrecognisable. BRAH (1996, p.208) uses another phrase "diaspora space", referring to the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of "us" and "them", are contested. Talking about difference, we are all different. Difference exists everywhere, in race, class, gender and experiences. All these differences contain social relations of power. Members of dominant groups often occupy privileged positions over minority groups or marginalized groups within political, cultural and institutional practices that strengthen such social divisions (see BRAH, 1996, p.112). For instance, the very fact that some of the ethnic Chinese children's denial of being different from the majority local children shows exactly the pressure they feel of being racially different in the local white dominated society. Their present being in a different place, from their past, of their being "elsewhere" enable them to learn and speak properly and concretely a language (English) that is of universal significance and appeal (RUSHDIE, 1992, p.12). To deny one's ethnic origins, to affirm the right to become other than what one is considered to be in and by racist discourses, is itself the natural consequence of racial discrimination. To reject one's ethnic connections or even reject the effort to learn one's ethnic language is demonstrating one's sense of inferiority as ethnic Chinese to the Western "superiority". Indeed, it only shows how powerful the Western culture and the overall institutionalized discrimination are influencing the ethnic minority Chinese children relocated in the West. Thus, the concept of racism becomes much more complex, it exists not only in the narrow meaning of a fact that an ethnic minority child has been bullied or called names, but rather it exists in a sophisticated form of being trapped into believing that the Western way of thinking is superior (BHABHA, 1994; HALL, 1997; SAID, 1978; SAID, 1993; SPIVAK, 1988). [29]

Having identified the different general trends between the two sub-ethnic groups, however, it is not meant to set a clear-cut demarcation line between the two groups. It is a mixed feeling for both groups when they talk about "here" (Northern Ireland) and "there" (Mainland China or Hong Kong). The phenomenon of such double consciousness (DU BOIS, 1903; GILROY, 1993; HEINZE, 1993) indicates exactly how the cultural repositioning is mixing the two different cultures

for these children. In other words, the ethnic Chinese children from both groups either want to assimilate with the local majority children in Northern Ireland in order to subvert the logic of racial ascription, or they want to have both identities and be accepted by both cultures. To end this section, as Stuart HALL (1990, pp.222-237) says,

"Cultural identities come from somewhere and have histories. But like everything, which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power." [30]

Their changing cultural position, in a way, not only gives these ethnic Chinese children a double-consciousness, but also double-possibilities in two different cultures. The choices depend very much on which culture they individually feel closer to. [31]

## **5. Conclusion**

Throughout the paper, I have taken the perspective of the post-structuralist researchers. I have examined how inter-ethnic minority Chinese children in Northern Ireland are making sense of their racial realities and interpreting their ethnic experiences, how they perceive themselves and constructing their identities in Northern Ireland, and how as ethnic minority Chinese, they foresee their future in Northern Ireland. The differences between the children from the Mainland China origins and the children from Hong Kong origins have also been explicitly analysed and explained through relating to their specific family backgrounds. This paper does not claim to represent the entire ethnic minority Chinese in Northern Ireland, because it still lacks the quantity of data. Having said that, this paper has covered a research on the Mainland Chinese group that has been neglected overall, together with the group of Hong Kong Chinese in the area of researching ethnic Chinese community in Northern Ireland. The observed contrast phenomenon shown in this paper remains the case in Northern Ireland. [32]

## Appendix

### From Mainland Chinese Children:

- [1] FB: How do you feel about your recent trip to China?  
CC: It has changed a lot.  
FB: Yeah? Change in what way?  
CC: Like more modern.  
FB: Better than here [Northern Ireland]?  
CC: *No, too crowded, too warm, it's dirty and lots of mosquitoes.*  
FB: Apart from dirty, crowded, and too warm and mosquitoes, what else do you feel about China, I mean emotionally?  
CC: Where I was? Well, *I feel I belong more here. It's easier for me here.*  
FB: Yes?  
CC: Yes, if I didn't move to China, for example. I realise it's difficult to get started with everything ... *Yeah, I'm used to being here now.*  
FB: Did you take this trip to China as something important and did you tell your friends about it?  
CC: They (his local friends) think it's very good, very big and everything, but *I don't*. Because I was born there - - sort of like - - I know I'm meant to be there, *but I don't - - want to be there - -*.  
FB: Do you feel a bit proud of being part of China?  
CC: *I don't really mind (laugh), not a big deal.*
- [2] FB: Do you feel equally comfortable with both Chinese friends and with local friends?  
YW: *I don't really think there is a difference.*  
FB: Do you perhaps have more local friends?  
YW: *Yeah, I think so, cause ... there is not a lot of - - like people from China around, - - and (there are) lots of Cantonese speaking people<sup>1</sup> here, so - - cause you don't really understand them.*  
FB: But other people may ask you, "do you feel closer to Chinese people because of your similar cultural background?"  
YW: *Um - - I don't think so. But maybe like - - you know they are from different places or something.*  
FB: In that case then, you might be more interested in children from China than those from Hong Kong?  
YW: I don't think it makes any difference. - - *I know I'm Chinese, but I know*

1 Cantonese is another dialect of Chinese language mostly spoken by people from Hong Kong and in Guang Dong Province in Mainland China.



*more about here [Northern Ireland], friends and language and culture here.*

[3] FB: So after so many years here [Northern Ireland], how do you feel about living in Northern Ireland?

Ian: Personally, I think, Belfast may not be the best place in the world, nowhere is perfect. But I think, despite all this violence, all this mess and divided views, it's not impossible to have a good childhood in Belfast. *I have lived here nearly half of my life; I still feel I belong here. I'd rather stand under a British flag than a Chinese flag.*

[4] FB: Have you ever gone to school in China?

YN: Yes, until I was about 9 years.

FB: Where do you prefer, here or there [Northern Ireland or China] if you compare the schools?

YN: *Um... I prefer the schools here, because my classmates (in Northern Ireland) don't consider me as an outsider. If I go back to China, they (children in China) would consider me as a foreigner coming back from a foreign country.*

FB: A bit changed? Why do you think children in China will think that way? After all, you look and you speak Chinese - -

YN: No, they would feel that I come back from a foreign country where they have never been to, they would feel curious about me.

FB: Curious? Do you not feel that the local people (in Northern Ireland) are also curious about you? Are they not the same?

YN: At first I did feel that, but not now, not anymore.

#### **From Hong Kong children:**

[5] FB: Do you like it here [N. Ireland]?

Jane: No.

FB: Why not?

Jane: *Because it's boring. There is nothing to do.*

FB: In Northern Ireland? What do you mean?

Jane: Like uh ... right, right, you can't go out late and everything. *If you are in Hong Kong, you can go out till ... like small hours, and some shops are open 24 hours.*

FB: Not like in here?

Jane: *No, it's boring here and there's nothing to do. Shops are closed at 5 o'clock. Every bar and everything you need to wait until you're 18. So it's really boring.*

FB: Yes? So, now anyway you've been here for so many years. Do you

often go back to Hong Kong?

Jane: Yeah.

FB: And do you want to stay there and not come back [laugh]?

Jane: Yeah.

FB: Really? Ok. Do you feel somehow a bit different when you go back to Hong Kong or what?

Jane: No. *It's just like a change and whenever you get on the plane, somebody changes, too, it's like you switch TV channels.*

[6] FB: After so many years in the UK, have you ever thought about who you are...is it very important to be Chinese?

John: *Yes, it is important. Coz you have to know that you're Chinese and people would, um, take advantage of you. And sometimes you would have to go back to China, to get a job, because of some racist stuff here.*

FB: When I asked some of the kids what it means to be Chinese, they would say "well, I'm quite proud of being Chinese, coz it means being smart and good at math and science ...". What do you think?

John: Yes, because Chinese people would probably study more ... at home, coz they wouldn't really go around as much as the English kids. They would always be around the streets and their parents wouldn't care about the school results. But to the Chinese people, they would think it's sort of important.

FB: So your mum and dad think it very important that you get good school results?

John: They wouldn't like, say, it's very important, but they would encourage us. *And someday we would have to go back to Hong Kong and we would have to know some Chinese. And if we don't learn, we have to be pretty smart to get a job here.*

[7] FB: Between Hong Kong and Northern Ireland, which do you prefer?

Joe: *I'd prefer Hong Kong, because, because they've got lots of new features, and ...and you can go to restaurants also all the time, the restaurants in Hong Kong.*

FB: It's all types of restaurants, as I know.

Joe: Yeah.

FB: So apart from restaurants, what else do you think is good in Hong Kong?

Joe: *There's not an awful lot of name-calling and everything, because there are not ... not many racist people.*

FB: Yeah? So you think that's OK?

Joe: Yes.

- [8] AX: *Some people call you names. That's really annoying.*
- FB: Yeah? What do you do then?
- Adam: Well last time, in old street, *I met those people and they threw stones at me and it nearly hit me in the eye.*
- FB: Really? Does it happen very often?
- Adam: My brother was very angry, so he chased after them.
- FB: Did you dare to chase after them?
- All: Yes.
- Joe: When you're angry, you can't control your anger ...
- FB: I know. And a lot of Chinese kids tell me that they can't really fit in this society because of the bully. What do you think?
- All: Not really.
- Adam: Yes, we do get name-calling.
- AX: *That's why we have to learn marshal arts to defend ourselves.*

#### **From Mainland Chinese parents:**

- [9] FB: How do you find life here for your child?
- LM: Generally speaking, here [Northern Ireland] is easier for our child than in China.
- FB: Why?
- LM: *Because the whole educational system here is better designed. Children start schooling from the age of 4.*
- FB: Don't you think that's too early for a child to start school?
- LM: No, I don't think so. They learn things through play. This is the best age for learning. *The Chinese educational system is more imposing. They force pupils to learn without caring about children's interests in learning. But here [Northern Ireland], they guide and stimulate children to learn and pay special attention to their interests.* The children don't have any pressure, and at the same time they learn stuff. Um ... generally speaking, I find the educational system here is simply excellent. We do have lots of good stuff in China, but we force children to learn by rote. We give the children very difficult things to learn, sometimes the level is set too high, and it lacks scope and practicality. And imposing such huge pressure on school children, I think, is a torture for them. Here children have a broader knowledge and more importantly, they don't have pressure and as a result, they learn things easier this way.
- [10] FB: Are you planning to settle down here?

- JWX: Obviously, it's not practical for our child to go back to China. We have reservations about the Chinese educational system. Another big problem is his Chinese language. And I don't like the Chinese competitive system. This morning Jimmy told me about his choice subjects for the next semester. He said, "I have chosen 11 subjects already, and I'll tell you what they are, Mum. You can tell me what you think about them but don't push me or anything. I only need your suggestion." We are a very liberal family, we don't push him that hard, we just give him the idea and it's up to him to make a choice. Many Chinese families push their kids too hard, forcing them to recite ancient Chinese poems and learn piano and stuff.
- [11] FB: Has he [Ian] been bullied before?
- Lan: He told me once, when he was still in primary school, that a local boy called him "Chinese boy" in the canteen. Immediately the local boy was asked by the teacher to stand up and apologise to Ian in front of all the pupils in the canteen. *That school is very strict. We sent him there because we heard it's one of the best schools in Belfast.*
- [12] FB: Do you think the local kids also bully themselves?
- LM: I'm sure of that. It's all the same. *But we Chinese tend to think of it differently, thinking that we're foreigners and being discriminated against. Lots of [British] children in England even go so far as to commit suicide because of being bullied, it's really sad and serious. I think we adults, should teach our kids and tell them to be open-minded. We can't get stuck in this narrow alley, thinking that we are foreigners and that's why they bully us. We should think carefully: do we have such things in China? And do we also do such things to ourselves? Of course we are different and we look different here and we can't deny that. If they [Northern Ireland children] go to China, they will feel the same. Therefore, I think we should look forward and think of it more positively.*

#### From HK parents:

- [13] FB: Have you noticed what makes them [your children] most unhappy here?
- Li: Um ... *racial problems. Like those kids from schools call them names sometimes. I still remember the other day on my way to the school to pick up my youngest son, and I saw some local kids throwing stones at him. It is a grammar school, but things like this still happen.*
- FB: I see. Is he the only Chinese student in his class?
- Li: Yes.
- FB: Who were those kids throwing stones at him then?
- Li: I asked him who they were, and he told me they were from other

classes, they were from senior classes, but still the same school.

FB: Does it happen very often?

Li: Not too often, but it happens, and most of the time they are different kids, not always the same kids. *I asked my son to report to the teachers, but he said there was no use. My daughter [Jane] is all right, because she is pretty strong, she's got strong character, but my two sons are not, they get bullied.*

FB: Have they ever wished to go back to Hong Kong whenever such things happened?

Li: Yes, indeed they have. *And I would always support them whenever they say that, because I myself have had similar experience. Even though we are adults, we are treated just the same sometimes by the local people.* I can give you an example: two weeks ago, we drove close to a zebra crossing. I believe two local students around year 4 or 5 from secondary school I guess, at first they didn't quite recognize that we were Chinese, but when they started passing the zebra crossing, they were sure that we were Chinese. So they slowed down their walking deliberately and then stopped and pretended to tie their shoelaces. They were doing that right in the middle of the zebra crossing for a long time. When they finished, they stared at us with hatred.

[14] FB: But do you know whether it is easier for your kids or your Chinese friends' kids to get jobs here or in the UK?

Lee: *No, not easy at all.* Like my sister's daughter, she was born and brought up here, and had her university degree, a very good one, but still she couldn't find any suitable jobs here, so she went back to Hong Kong and she got a job there. But then she married her husband who couldn't find any jobs in Hong Kong, so they came back to the UK to have further higher education in journalism. In the end, he got a job in the UK but after two years he was sacked ... I guess it's because he's Chinese. So now, her husband goes back to restaurant work.

FB: I heard of such stories before, and they told me the reason is that they don't like to work for other people, but they'd rather to work for themselves and be their own boss.

Lee: *But after having a higher education, they can manage their restaurants better than other people. That's for sure. But I have to say, it's very very tough job working in restaurants.*

[15] FB: How do you feel to live in a foreign country after so many years?

Song: After so many years here, what I feel most strongly is the importance of language. I have always wanted my children to learn well both Chinese and English. English for them shouldn't be a problem. Chinese Mandarin ... like in the future, they may need to go to Mainland China...

FB: Are you expecting any difficulties for your kids if they go back to Hong Kong or Mainland China?

Song: Yes, *I believe so*. But as soon as they get used to the habit or rhythm in Hong Kong, they will very soon adapt to life there. *The life rhythm there is very fast while here it's very slow. And also their Chinese is not as good as the local Hong Kong people*. If they could speak Mandarin, it'll be much better.

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