

Eyes Wide Open: An Investigation into how and why Chinese Australian adolescents' aspirations towards westernisation are expressed in particular stylised manifestations, and the impacts on the formation of Chinese identity

The procurement of westernisation was generally regarded as a positive acquisition by my peers, who respected, desired, and almost viewed it to be an achievement. This was alluded to in my focus groups, with participants claiming that '*being Chinese isn't that cool*'<sup>1</sup> and one individual claiming, '*I find [being Western] more interesting*'<sup>2</sup>. Thus, there is a desire to be seen and labelled as 'westernised', however this becomes a contentious issue when considering the prominence of their continued adherence to Chinese cultural practices and behaviours. I measured the extent of Chinese identity amongst Chinese-Australian adolescents through the integration of Sociologist Jean Phinney's 1992 multidimensional model of ethnic identity development<sup>3</sup> within my questionnaire. Phinney's model constituted the behavioural component: the level of an individual's involvement in activities related to their ethnicity, and the cognitive component: the extent to which individuals adopt or are interested in their ethnicity in terms of its history, values and traditions.

Through the alignment of my questions with the behavioural and cognitive components of Phinney's model, the prominence of a Chinese ethnic identity amongst most Chinese-Australian adolescents became apparent, with 96% of respondents engaging or sometimes engaging with behaviours linked to Chinese heritage, and 62% of respondents feeling interested in acquiring knowledge about their Chinese heritage. As there is an attempt from Chinese-Australian adolescents to preserve and embrace their Chinese identity, their aspiration to be viewed as 'westernised' becomes somewhat problematic, seeing as the Chinese and the West originate from markedly different philosophical, ideological, historical and cultural contexts.<sup>4</sup>

Given this context of contrasting cultures, the question follows as to how a Chinese-Australian adolescent would retain both their Chinese identity through the

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<sup>1</sup> Focus Group 2 with 16-18 year old Chinese-Australian adolescent boys, conducted 12/04/2013-Aidan\*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Phinney, J. S. (1990). Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: A review of research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108, pp. 499–514.

<sup>4</sup> Lam, C. *Op Cit.*

perpetuation of values, behaviours and traditions, whilst also aspiring to ‘westernise’ and be seen as a ‘western individual’. With 70% of my questionnaire respondents stating that they identify more strongly with their Western culture than their Chinese background<sup>5</sup>, it indicated that Chinese-Australians who were born in Australia might undergo a particularly acute conflict between their identification of themselves as primarily ‘Australian’ or ‘western’ and their appearances to others as primarily ‘Chinese’ or ‘oriental’.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, I propose that rather than seeking ‘complete westernisation’, Chinese-Australian adolescents adopt a secondary category of westernisation which I consider more so an ‘aspiration to westernise’. This, I believe, manifests through an alteration of appearance; specifically a shift from looking predominantly ‘Chinese’ to an appearance that aligns closely with western perceptions of beauty. My peers justify the desire for a ‘western’ appearance by stating that it is ‘*more about wanting to fit in*’<sup>7</sup>, ‘*a removal from any stereotypes*’<sup>8</sup> and ‘*because people look at you but don’t necessarily engage with what you value*’<sup>9</sup>. The clearest explanation for this desire to ‘fit in’ would be that Chinese-Australian adolescents comprise a racial minority in Australia with distinct physical features which would be “normal” in Asia but which may not fit in with the usual or ideal notions of physical attractiveness in Western societies.<sup>10</sup> Thus, alterations in physical appearance materialise mostly in an anxiety to *appear* western but not to become *identical* to other ‘westerners’ in terms of personality and behaviour, as these aspects are ideally constructed by one’s Chinese cultural ideals.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Questionnaire Results- 180 Chinese-Australian adolescent girls and boys, aged 16-18, conducted 22/03/2013 - 29/03/2013

<sup>6</sup> Chen, C.L., (1981). An Asian American Approach to Confronting Racism, *East/West: the Chinese American Journal*, pp. 2,5.

<sup>7</sup> Focus Group 1 with 16-18 year old Chinese-Australian adolescent girls, conducted 11/04/2013- Margaret\*

<sup>8</sup> Focus Group 2 with 16-18 year old Chinese-Australian adolescent boys, conducted 12/04/2013- Aidan\*

<sup>9</sup> Focus Group 1 with 16-18 year old Chinese-Australian adolescent girls, conducted 11/04/2013- Catherine\*

<sup>10</sup> Chen, C. and Yang, D. (1986.) The Self Image of Chinese—American Adolescents: a Cross—Cultural Comparison. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 32 (19), p7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*