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OP-ED

Ethnic Identity in Transition: Chinese New Year through the Years

Elaine Chan

Multiculturalism has been identified as the key educational issue of the epoch. However, despite studies acknowledging the importance of multiculturalism and multilingualism in school contexts and research that attests to the importance of teachers learning about individual students' experiences of culture rather than generalizing knowledge about culture groups to individual students, there exists only a small, and mostly recent, literature examining ethnic identity experientially. In the spirit of work done by Phillion (1999, 2002), He (1998, 2002a, b), and Hoffman (1989) examining the complexities of factors shaping a sense of ethnic identity, I examine here the experiences of first-generation Chinese Canadians as they interact with their peers and teachers at Bay Street School.¹ I reflect on stories of Chinese New Year experiences, both personal experiences and stories gathered through observations and conversations with members of the Bay Street School community during school visits, to demonstrate ways in which the school contexts of first-generation Chinese Canadians may have contributed to a sense of ethnic identity as changing and shifting across landscapes of difference. I ask:

- How do individuals born in Canada to immigrant parents and educated in Canadian schools with children of diverse ethnic backgrounds think about and express their sense of ethnic identity?
- How are cultural differences addressed in the curriculum and in interactions in a school context?
- How do my experiences of ethnic identity across time, place, and circumstances shape my interpretation of the experiences of my participants?

I interweave my personal stories of experience as a first-generation Chinese Canadian, former classroom teacher, and educational researcher with those of my first-generation Chinese-Canadian students, their peers, and their teachers. I use my own stories of experience to demonstrate the idea of ethnic identity in transition across different contexts and situations over many years.

I focus in particular on the experiences of first-generation Chinese Canadians in a Canadian context because reflection upon my personal experiences as a first-generation Chinese Canadian growing up in Ottawa raised a disturbing sense of incongruity. I have memories of a happy childhood with cousins from my large extended family, and a sense of belonging in schools where I felt that my teachers and peers treated me in the same way they treated other children. This sense of belonging, however, was combined with a strong desire to avoid discussion about my family's practices that were not in line with those I read about in books or saw on television. As an adult reflecting on my childhood, I realize with a sense of revelation that the very practices that had been a source of embarrassment as a child may also have instilled in me a sense of belonging as a descendent of a few Chinese families from remote villages in Canton, China.

Although I originally believed that, despite similarities, my experiences were unique, and, thus, could not contribute to knowledge about what other students of ethnic minority background might experience, reflection upon those experiences reinforced the need for research examining the experiences of students of ethnic minority background in Canadian schools. My personal goal to understand the complex interaction of experiences that shaped my own sense of ethnic identity as a first-generation Chinese Canadian is coupled with a professional goal to understand how the ethnic identity of first-generation Chinese-Canadian students may be shaped by and may shape school experiences. Such insights gained by beginning with [my]self may inform teaching practices, curriculum development, and the curricula in teacher education. "Self-knowledge is empowering" (Bateson 1989: 5), and teachers need to tell their stories not only to understand themselves but also to comprehend the power of stories in the lives of the students they teach. In this way, "teachers' and students' stories are central to teacher education and to the improvement of schools" (Connelly and Clandinin 1994: 158). By examining my teacher stories and drawing on my personal practical knowledge as a teacher and education researcher, I may contribute to research that counters the tendency in the past to overlook the experience and knowledge teachers bring to their teaching.

I focus in particular on individuals of Chinese descent because they represent 27% of the total visible ethnic minority group in Canada (Statistics Canada 1998) and over half of new immigrants in Toronto in 1999 (Statistics Canada 2000). Moreover, the Chinese-speaking population continues to grow in Toronto and a number of other major Canadian cities (Statistics Canada 2002). Although educators cannot assume that experiences of individuals of one ethnic group are identical to those of other ethnic groups, learning about the experiences of students of Chinese background may shed light on the complex interaction of factors shaping the identity of individuals of other ethnic groups.

Some theoretical background

In this essay, I draw on Dewey's (1938) notion of experience as shaped by social context and inextricably intertwined with life-events to examine the relationship between education and ethnic identity: "amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (p. 25). Dewey's (1934, 1938) conception of the interconnectedness of experience, education, and life, reinforced by Connelly and Clandinin's (1995) reference to life as central to education, and education, experience, and life being "inextricably intertwined" (Clandinin and Connelly 1994: 415), suggests that educators may gain an understanding of how a sense of ethnic identity is perceived through an examination of experience.

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 189) write, "Narrative inquiry is an experience of the experience. It is people in relation studying with people in relation." I employed a narrative approach, with an emphasis on stories as "the closest we can come to experience" (Clandinin and Connelly 1994: 415). "Stories of experience" collected through interaction with teachers, students, and other members of the school community provided a means of examining how individuals view their experiences.

I reflect upon stories about New Year's celebrations to examine how students of Chinese descent view their ethnic identity and how I interpret my own sense of ethnic identity as a first-generation Chinese Canadian. The stories take place in different places, at different times—in the past, when I was learning about ways in which my Chinese background interacted with the Canadian society as represented by my school community and my neighborhood; in the present as I reflect upon the similarities and differences that connect and challenge my thoughts on what a sense of Chinese-Canadian identity means to my student- and teacher-participants and me. Each of the following stories reflects the circumstances under which they were experienced, but they are interconnected by a sense of resonance as I reflected upon the similarities in how social context interacted with time and people to shape a sense of ethnic identity. The stories demonstrate ways in which interconnections surfaced and resurfaced across differences in time and context.

Chinese New Year Ribbon Dance story

In the school gymnasium filled with past and present members of the school community, six grade 7 and 8 girls in bright red silk shirts and pants danced gracefully to music playing from a tape recorder at the side of the stage. They were performing a dance they had recently performed at local Chinese New Year celebrations for their principal's retirement party. Their peers were in the audience, as were their teachers and some parents. Their friends watched them perform, impressed by the costumes and the attention they were receiving. For the duration of the performance, they were the center of attention in a room full of people attending an important community event. Following the performance, I approached the girls and complimented them on their beautiful dancing. I expected they would be pleased to talk about it since it had been such a success. They were surprisingly uninterested in elaborating upon their involvement in

the dancing and answered my questions with only the necessary short answers. They seemed embarrassed by the attention. I noticed that they had undone their elaborate hairstyles and removed their costumes—with the exception of a little remaining make-up, they looked as they usually did in class.

(Field note, 31 January 2001)

At Bay Street School,² Chinese culture and language are acknowledged in numerous ways. Cantonese and Mandarin classes are large; translators, interpreters, and parent volunteers are available to help translate if an unexpected situation arises; and school notices are written in five different languages to accommodate the languages most commonly used by the students in their homes. The number of students who speak Chinese freely is such that Chinese and English coexist, and the availability of people with whom to interact and ask about Chinese language and culture validate its presence as a strong influence in the school.

Memories of childhood experiences

As I interacted with teachers and students and learned about the experiences of first-generation Chinese-Canadian students in the school, I became aware of the many ways in which their school environment differs from the one I remember experiencing as a child. My adult recollection of school experiences does not include learning about different cultures as a part of the curriculum. It was not until grade 5 that I realized that some children celebrated different holidays because they were Jewish, and I do not remember anyone asking about Chinese culture until I had a friend that year who used to ask me what we had eaten for supper. I only provided basic details, telling her that we had eaten beef, rice, and vegetables when, in fact, we had eaten beef with black bean sauce and stir-fried vegetables prepared in a wok, laid the food out in the middle of the table, eaten rice from bowls, and used chopsticks throughout the meal. After many years when ethnic cultures and traditions did not seem to be a part of what was discussed in school, perhaps I had internalized Chinese culture as something private that occurred at home, separate from my public life in school and in the neighborhood.

During the 1970s, when I was growing up, I lived in a neighborhood where there were not many Chinese families, and where non-Chinese families did not seem to know much about Chinese culture. Our family was one of two Chinese families in the neighborhood, and class pictures from elementary school attest to my siblings and me being among only three Chinese families in the school. I was usually the only Chinese child in my class and did not have much interaction with Chinese children. I remember children asking about whether we used chopsticks, being surprised when we said that we did, and imitating my grandparents' Chinese when they wanted to mock us. Teachers and peers at school alternated between assuming that we celebrated the same holidays marked on the school calendar and assuming that we would be knowledgeable about Buddhism or current events in China or Hong Kong. They did not know about the extent to which we adhered to practices they viewed as part of Chinese culture, nor did they know enough about the extent

of diversity within the Chinese community to realize that being Chinese would mean something different for all of us.

As an adult thinking back on my childhood, I remember being embarrassed that my family seemed different from the families featured on TV or in school textbooks and not wanting to talk about the differences. We did not speak English, eat steak for supper, or listen to popular music on the radio or on records the way my friends seemed to. Rather, we ate with chopsticks, spoke in Chinese, and listened to Chinese Opera. It seemed that I was living a Chinese existence in a community that did not acknowledge it in a way that encouraged me to feel proud of my cultural heritage. Reflecting on the lack of acknowledgment for my Chinese background in school, I think I began to view Canadian culture as the standard.

Although focusing on ways in which children are similar rather than emphasizing cultural differences may have been used as a means of expressing acceptance of all children (Paley 1979), I remember feeling the differences regardless of whether or not they were acknowledged. Paley (1995) examined the practice of overlooking difference in order to express acceptance and discussed how students may view their own behaviors as being beyond the range accepted by peers and feel compelled to walk "on eggs" (p. 4) in an attempt to keep cultural differences hidden when they were not considered. I remember wondering whether my behavior was appropriate and monitoring it to ensure that I would conform to the "norms" of the dominant culture. The lack of support for the acceptability of difference may have rendered differences a source of embarrassment for me.

Schooling seemed to reinforce the differences between home and school culture without validating the importance of knowing about my home culture and maternal language. I learned to keep the two cultures separate in order to fit in, but in doing so I was denying my Chinese culture in order to be accepted in the majority culture. The perceived lack of acknowledgment for the home culture in the school community and society might have contributed to my lack of knowledge about the home culture, limited or lack of fluency in the home language, and a lack of affiliation to individuals of Chinese descent.

Surrounded with the majority culture and accustomed to speaking in English everywhere except at home, an acquaintance's recent statement that "I thought I was White until I was about 20!" resonated with me as well. Grayson et al. (1994) conducted focus groups with university students of Chinese descent and discovered that, although their participants were members of a visible minority group by virtue of their physical appearance, they did not view themselves as members of an ethnic minority. This finding was especially pronounced in individuals who had grown up with little exposure to Chinese culture and limited interaction with Chinese individuals. Perhaps the lack of contact with Chinese culture led them to view themselves as one of the group and to downplay the role of ethnicity in their interactions with others. This realization is further substantiated by Wong-Fillmore's (1991) and Rodriguez's (1982) examinations of the consequences of the lack of support for the maintenance of the home language in school on maternal-language fluency and communication, and Kouritzin's (1999) examination of factors contributing to a sense of "incompletion" among Canadians of ethnic minority background. I have this sense of incompleteness as I realize the frequency with which feelings of inadequacy surface when I am interacting with others about Chinese language and culture.

In comparison to when I was a child, instances where Chinese culture is acknowledged outside the home became more frequent, and Chinese food became more mainstream as the number of Chinese restaurants increased. In addition, Chinese festivals such as the Dragon Boat Races, and New Year's and Autumnal Moon Festivals became events celebrated in the greater community. The larger numbers of Chinese families living in Canada in general, and Ontario in particular, and the increase in immigration from other countries since the 1970s is reflected in the number of children of immigrant families enrolled in Canadian schools. I think I developed the idea that, with larger Chinese communities and more exposure to Chinese culture, willingness to accept cultural differences would increase as well.

My sense of ethnic identity in Bay Street School

At Bay Street School, my affiliation to Chinese culture felt acknowledged and accepted. I was exposed to information about Chinese culture through interaction with Chinese students and teachers within the school community. Moreover, not only was I physically not a minority, but the curriculum and the school atmosphere acknowledged Chinese language and culture as well.

At the same time, I felt that my level of proficiency in Chinese was lower and my knowledge of culture was less than that of my students at Bay Street School who have had the advantage of Chinese language classes and more exposure to Chinese language and culture. I was not able to communicate with Chinese children who did not speak English or to communicate well with community members, parents, and grandparents with the ease that I am able to do in English. On the one hand, I felt relatively comfortable talking about or referring to aspects of Chinese culture; on the other hand, the strong Chinese presence in the school was a regular reminder of what I was not able to say in Chinese and what I might not know about Chinese culture.

Being considered a representative of Chinese culture

Although the range of difference among individuals of an ethnic group is acknowledged, it seems that I am considered a representative of Chinese culture at times by nature of my identity as a Chinese person. I was reminded of this role when one of the teachers at the school, Dan, asked me about what Chinese people eat at Chinese New Year. Many of his students are of Chinese descent, and he wanted to bring in some food to acknowledge the New Year. He said his wife's Chinese coworker had not provided an adequate answer either. I felt reassured that I was not the only Chinese person who did not know. His question initiated a discussion with my own family about how we had celebrated Chinese New Year as children and motivated my sister and me to go to one of the numerous Chinese malls in the suburbs of Toronto to investigate. Had we been in Ottawa or had it been 30 years ago, we might not have done this because the shops would not have been available, nor would the assortment of foods and decorations been as diverse. The large Chinese population in Toronto in the year 2000 creates a market for Chinese goods and a demand

for Chinese holiday celebrations. I thought about whether I was becoming “more Chinese” by participating in the New Year preparations and festivities.

How can I be Chinese if I don't know about Chinese culture?

The large proportion of Chinese students in Dan's class reflected immigration and settlement patterns in Canada around the year 2000. His desire to acknowledge the culture of his students was shaped by a school environment supportive of the inclusion of cultural influences in the curriculum. This environment contributed to his looking to colleagues who could help him and to his acknowledging the potential of students and peers of ethnic minority background who might be approached as curricular resources. His request for information drew me into reflection about ways in which Bay Street School differed from the elementary schools I attended as a child, and about my role in helping to teach students as well as colleagues about Chinese culture. However, my own experience as a child learning about Chinese culture in isolation from other Chinese families or a large Chinese community casts doubts on my ability to teach others about my cultures when I did not feel I knew enough myself.

This sense of not knowing enough about Chinese culture surfaced again when my teacher colleague, William, asked, “What are you doing for the lunar New Year?” and I responded by asking, “Well, when is it?” My sense of connection, or disconnection, was reinforced in this school community where Chinese represent a large proportion of the student population. I was pleased that the New Year was being acknowledged, but my response to my colleague was similar to that I would have provided as a child living during the 1970s if someone had asked me about the date of the Chinese New Year. The date changes from year to year because it is based on the lunar calendar. Having grown up in a community where Chinese New Year was not a community event, I was not accustomed to keeping track of when it would occur.

I remember vaguely as a child that I would return home from school sometime during the winter to have my parents inform me that it was the Chinese New Year and that we would be having a special dinner. Sometimes we put on new clothes and posed for pictures in the living room. Although my own family acknowledged the day with a small celebration, I was not aware of whether other Chinese families did so as well, nor did I know the details about how they celebrated. Chinese New Year, though enjoyed, was not a day I anxiously anticipated. Even now that I live in Toronto where there is a large Chinese population and Chinese New Year is an event that brings Chinese families to the malls and restaurants in preparation, I continue to view it as simply another day when I may have a special dinner, rather than an event involving extensive preparation, anticipation, and celebration. Many of the students in my colleague's classroom, however, had notified their teachers that they would not be attending school, and their teachers expected that even those from whom they did not have advance notice, would not attend. In contrast, I did not even know when the New Year would begin.

My role as a teaching resource person

Dan's question about Chinese New Year foods reminded me of a time when I was called upon to help an associate teacher plan a Chinese New Year's event.

A few years ago, I was working in a grade 3 class. One day, I arrived to find the children making dragons out of cardboard boxes, tissue paper, and streamers, and playing games with chopsticks, ping-pong balls, and marshmallows. They were celebrating Chinese New Year. Later that afternoon, the father of a Chinese child came to tell the children about how children in China celebrate the New Year. Upon finishing his talk, he presented the children with little packets of sweetened beans, lotus root, and coconut pieces, and envelopes of lucky money. The children were thrilled and enjoyed the treats, but when the teacher asked David to thank his father for coming, he became embarrassed and refused to say anything. Since David was usually a compliant child, the teacher was puzzled and urged him to say thank you. Again, he refused. Some of the other children, however, expressed their appreciation, saying how lucky they were to have a visitor tell them about Chinese New Year (Chan and Boone 2001: 37).

As I reflected upon the incident, I was mortified by the role I played as a resource person about Chinese culture. The classroom teacher had asked me a few weeks earlier about how I had celebrated Chinese New Year as a child. I took her question at face value and told her that I attended the New Year's Festival in the cafeteria of the high school where I attended Chinese School. I played games such as trying to pick up ping-pong balls with chopsticks or moving twisted wire pieces through mazes, and watched fan dances and dragon dances. As I reflect on the event now as an adult inquiring into ethnic identity, I wonder about the authenticity of the preparations and festivities for the Chinese New Year referred to in the story. From what I have heard from my mother, these activities bear little resemblance to the ways in which Chinese New Year is celebrated in Hong Kong or China. Dragon dances, fan dances, and festivities with friends and family reflect ways in which Chinese celebrate the New Year; playing with chopsticks and ping-pong balls do not. By treating the teacher's request for information about Chinese New Year as small-talk, I had contributed to teaching children about Chinese culture in ways that did not reflect an "authentic" New Year's celebration.

The event may be considered an example of ways in which I do not feel that I am Chinese enough. I wondered about whether living in Canada, even among the large Chinese population in Toronto, would ensure that I would always be on the border, on the fringe, of Chinese culture. Yet, what is an "authentic" representation of culture? Regardless of whether my experiences are representative of Chinese people, these memories are the only experiences I have of celebrating Chinese New Year. The existence of an "authentic" Chinese culture suggests a boundary within which adherence to specific behaviors and practices may be viewed as a measure of the degree of affiliation to the culture. However, I am no more or less Chinese if my experiences are not along the lines of those of other Chinese people. The idea of boundaries within which authenticity may be measured is a myth.

Despite similarities in practices or beliefs among members of an ethnic group there does not exist a specific set of common criteria for behaviors, practices, or beliefs to which members of the culture must adhere. Moreover, given the range of differences displayed and the dimensions in these stories examining a single event, a formalistic approach that places individuals within a group bound by lines is not sufficient. Yet, the idea persists of an ethnic group with stereotypical ideas about ways in which members of the group should behave and what they should believe. I wondered about whether my sense of a lack of knowledge about Chinese culture learned in relative isolation from the support of a Chinese community led me to attribute my own experiences of Chinese culture as “unauthentic” when none of the beliefs or practices is any less authentic than others.

I began this exploration as a response in part to a yearning for a community of individuals who have lived similar experiences, and like a contributor to Nam’s (2001) collection of stories of experience of Asian American women, sought “comfort in commonality,” the reassuring “surprise of a recognizable person” (Miller 1994: 503). However, what does Chinese culture mean when boundaries that may define what it means to be Chinese do not exist? Why do I feel a sense of affiliation with this group, when the range of difference within the group is a more accurate description of the group than similarities that individual members may share with one another? Interactions with the students suggest not only that I have a desire to find cultural commonalities with the students but also that they are looking for points of connection with me as well. Several students asked me if I was Chinese when I met them, whether I am able to speak Chinese, and about where I was born. An incident where one of my student-participants overheard me speaking in Chinese with a grandparent in the Parent Centre of the school initiated another round of questions about the contexts and the people with whom I speak in Chinese, and a request to say something in Chinese. People expect to find commonalities and a sense of resonance among others of the same ethnic background. Given the infinite number of ways in which members of the same ethnicity may differ, I wondered about whether it is this expectation of finding similarities that draws people of the same ethnic background together. Is this expectation of similarity and resonance a story to live by?

Desire to blend in

Thinking about the students’ reluctance to talk about their dancing, and David’s response to his father talking about life in China as a child, reminded me of instances during my own childhood when I wanted to blend in with my peers rather than be identified as different. I did not appreciate being asked about Chinese culture or being called upon to say Chinese words.

I have witnessed numerous occasions when students of ethnic minority background had announced that they had changed their names to sound like the more common names of their peers, or refused to eat food that their parents had given them because it looked different from what their peers were eating. The ethnic background of the students usually differs from my own, but the desire to hide cultural differences in order to fit in with peers resonated with me. My adult perspective enables me to identify the lack of effective acknowledgment of cultural differences in the curriculum as a factor contributing to this

sense of discomfort. As a child, I understood the discomfort in terms of feeling isolated from my peers. Although I spoke Chinese, participated in Chinese holidays, and interacted with members of the Chinese community at home, I spoke in English and abided by the behavioral standards of my peers at school. Both home and school were integral aspects of my life, but there did not seem to be much interaction between the two settings. Thinking about David's response reminded me of childhood experiences and engaged me in reflection about ways in which the home and school lives of my students might differ and ways in which they might be similar to my own experiences. The place and time during which the stories took place differed, but the Chinese Canadians featured in the stories had in common the desire not to highlight affiliation to Chinese culture in the school context.

As an observer in Bay Street School, I witnessed many ways in which the school and neighborhood life of my students differed from my own. The girls' response to my questions about their dancing in the "Ribbon Dance story" initially surprised me because their peers' responses to their performance had been so positive, they live in a community with a strong Chinese influence, and they attend a school where the large Chinese student population has Chinese classes as part of their regular curriculum. The acknowledgment in school for their culture created the expectation in my mind that they would be pleased to share their knowledge of Chinese dancing. Upon reflection, their response brought to my attention the similarities between my desire as a child to keep the school and home cultures separate, and my students' desire to blend in with their peers rather than to talk about ways in which they might be different. Despite many practices and events that acknowledged cultural diversity in general and Chinese culture and language in particular in their school and community contexts, the students' response to my interest in their dancing suggested that, although their culture was viewed as a positive and natural contribution to school events, they might have preferred not to stand out from their peers. In this way, their responses were similar to David's response to his father visiting his class to teach his classmates about Chinese New Year, and my response to my grade 5 friend's curiosity about what my family had eaten for supper.

Overall reflections

Through reflection upon personal stories of experience in relation to those of my students as they interact with their peers and their teachers, I have learned about ways in which participation in Canadian schools and society might contribute to shaping a sense of ethnic identity. An experience-oriented approach focusing on individuals and communities in context has enabled me to examine how ethnic identity might be perceived and expressed by first-generation Chinese Canadians. I have explored issues of identity, including the interaction of social, academic, school, parent, and peer influences, that are essential in a society where so many people are attempting to maintain a balance between a sense of ethnic heritage by adhering to their home culture and a sense of country by assimilating to Canadian culture. In addition, I have examined how my experiences might have shaped my interpretation of my participants' experiences, and how I make sense of my own ethnic identity when it is constantly changing, emerging, and shifting. Overall, reflection upon stories of experience, and interaction with my participants about our cultural identity, has

informed my understanding of how we might perceive our sense of ethnic identity in relation to others. By referring to my experience as a student as I interacted with the students at Bay Street School, I learned about the extent to which our stories resonated with one another. Our ethnic identity as Chinese Canadians born, educated, and raised in Canada places us in the same ethnic group of which membership is further reinforced by the perception of a sense of Chinese culture. At the same time, I have learned about the extent to which diversity in experiences and interpretation is as much a feature of research on ethnic identity as resonance because the lives of the community I have worked with at Bay Street School are as different from mine as they are similar.

I recognize that the commonalities as well as the differences are fleeting in that a sense of ethnic identity is so closely connected to the contexts in which we live our lives. My sense of ethnic identity changes when I am in a non-Chinese community, where I am perceived as an expert about Chinese culture by virtue of my ethnicity and teased when I talk about Chinese events or customs with anything but certainty. It changes again when I am in Chinatown, where the majority of residents are recent immigrants from areas of China about which I know very little. I do not assume that I understand their experiences working in the neighborhood clothing factories or in the kitchens of the Chinese restaurants that line the streets. Yet, these same streets are a part of my own middle-class suburban childhood in that I have vague memories of excursions to Chinatown as a child visiting Toronto with my family. When I am in the school context among first-generation Chinese-Canadian students whose experiences with Chinese culture are more closely integrated into their school lives than my school life was by nature of the time and the place in which they live, I am relieved that the gap that I felt between my home and school cultures does not seem as drastic for the students with whom I worked. Yet, listening to and observing interactions between members of different culture groups within the school reminded me that the differences remain a source of conflict for some of the students.

The stories suggest that the idea of ethnic identity straddles both Ricoeur's (1992) and Bateson's (1994, 2000) notion of identity as emergent and constantly shifting and changing with the context and circumstances of a situation, and Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) notion of identity as a story to live by. He (2002b: 514) referred to the cross-cultural experiences of Chinese teachers as they establish academic careers in North American universities as "ceaseless motion, disruption, and continuity," while Huber and Whelan (2001) suggested the need for multiple perspectives to capture her sense of self as it shifted and evolved in response to changing landscapes. I searched to find what He (2002b: 527) termed "the dialectic between continuity and change" of being Chinese Canadian and living with the idea that being Chinese involves stereotypical and individual features that might or might not reflect how I and other first-generation Chinese Canadians saw ourselves. The idea of ethnic identity encompassing certain features is a story to live by. When I interact with others who share attributes, I experience a sense of resonance, and when I encounter discrepancies in our beliefs or practices, I wonder whether the differences are based on individual differences or whether I or the person with whom I am interacting is an anomaly. I wonder about why we have come to associate certain features or behaviors with members of an ethnic group.

As an adult reflecting upon ways in which the curriculum and practices in my elementary schools considered cultural diversity, I do not think that it was effectively acknowledged when compared to what was currently done in Bay Street School. I learned to live by the standards established by the community in which I lived and the schools I attended, but I also learned to contain my knowledge of Chinese culture to interactions with other Chinese people. In some ways, my identity has been shaped by contradictions. I am Chinese, but I am Canadian; I understand Chinese but am only able to speak a little and write at a basic level. I feel Chinese when I am with non-Chinese peers but not Chinese enough when I am interacting with Chinese from Hong Kong, China, or even senior members of my own family. I understand the rationale for some of the traditions and practices but choose not to abide by all of them. Yet, despite a sense of inadequacy about my knowledge of Chinese language and culture, I acknowledge a sense of affiliation with individuals of Chinese descent. I am comfortable speaking different languages in different contexts and do not realize the extent of disruption unless I am with individuals who do not speak both Chinese and English. Another story to live by may be the ease with which my student participants and I seem to be able to move among Chinese and non-Chinese communities seamlessly, despite the different, sometimes contradicting, expectations of each community.

I began with the intention of examining the ethnic identity of first-generation Chinese Canadians to inform school practices and curriculum decisions addressing the needs of children of ethnic minority background. The stories and reflections suggest that the idea of membership in an ethnic group may be a myth, given the absence of specific descriptions or criteria to which individuals must adhere and the absence of boundaries within which individuals must remain in order to be considered members of the group. Nonetheless, some members of the Bay Street School community believe strongly in their sense of affiliation to others in the group. This realization suggests that the idea of ethnic identity and cultural groups may be based on perceived affiliation to a set of attributes that members of a group may possess but that cannot be applied consistently across all members of the group. Each person's perception of what it means to be a Chinese Canadian differs, yet a sense of resonance about various attributes viewed by some members of the group seems sufficient to support the myth of a common body of attributes held by Chinese Canadians. This conclusion challenges current notions of ethnic identity and what it means to belong to an ethnic group. It contributes to real-life understanding of the place of first-generation Chinese Canadians and others in the Canadian multicultural context by highlighting the complexity of issues shaping a sense of ethnic identity.

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Notes

1. I conducted participant observations with a group of grade 8 students and their teachers at Bay Street School, the urban elementary school where I was a researcher from September 2000 to March 2002. I took part in all aspects of classroom life, attended staff meetings and school events, and interacted with members of the school community to learn about ways in which issues of ethnicity, culture, and language play out in the school context. Stories were set into this context as I reflected upon and wrote about them in my field notes and research journal. Descriptive field notes following observations, school visits and conversations, interview transcripts, researcher journals and theoretical memos were computerized, and all data, including samples of student work, communication between home and school, announcements of school events, and media coverage were filed into the existing project archival system.
2. All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

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