The Necessity and Possibility of Decolonizing the Understanding of Chinese-ness

Tao Zhang
Southern Illinois University Carbondale, tao.zhang@siu.edu

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THE NECESSITY AND POSSIBILITY OF DECOLONIZING THE UNDERSTANDING OF CHINESE-NESS

by

Tao Zhang

B.A., Hainan University, 1999
M.A., Yunnan University, 2007
M.A., Brandeis University, 2014

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the
Doctor of Philosophy degree

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THE NECESSITY AND POSSIBILITY OF DECOLONIZING THE UNDERSTANDING OF CHINESE-NESS

by
Tao Zhang

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In the field of Communication Studies

Approved by:
Dr. Nilanjana R. Bardhan, Chair
Dr. Craig Engstrom
Dr. Alfred Frankowski
Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook
Dr. Sandra Pensoneau-Conway

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Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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TITLE: THE NECESSITY AND POSSIBILITY OF DECOLONIZING THE UNDERSTANDING OF CHINESE-NESS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Nilanjana R. Bardhan

In this dissertation, I explore how crossing national borders has made me aware of the many identity borders that I have crossed as a transnational Chinese, and how I am caught up in identity politics between the “Chinese,” who do not necessarily always identify as “Chinese” in the transnational context. However, as a racialized group in the U.S., transnational Chinese are perceived as a homogeneous population, usually through racially (“Yellow Peril” or “Chinese Virus”) and politically (“Red Scare”) charged lenses measured by Western/U.S. binaristic and hierarchical standards. Therefore, in this research project, I problematize dominant U.S. race logic, i.e., the White/Non-White binary, for its limited capabilities of understanding and explaining identity, communication, culture, and power in an increasingly interconnected world; and I also call for an alternative theorizing of race and identity in the transnational context.

Border crossings within the conditions of contemporary globalization have intensified interconnectivities and complicated how we comprehend and communicate our identities. It thus becomes essential to find ways to “unsettle and restage” racial and cultural differences in the context of globalization (Shome & Hegde, 2002a, p. 174-5). With a different skin color, speaking English with a foreign accent while being perceived as “Model Minorities,” transnational Chinese have lately been ascribed with another pathologized identity label: “Chinese Virus,” which may be understood as an extension of the “Yellow Peril” rhetoric. Furthermore, within the Chinese communities, due to historical reasons, colonialism, political unrest, and civil war, many Taiwanese and Hong Kongers
identify themselves very differently from mainland Chinese. When crossing borders to live together in the U.S., the identity tensions among Chinese ethnicities in addition to the interracial confrontations between transnational Chinese and local racial groups only make understanding what it means to be Chinese on the racial landscape of the U.S. even more complex.

I weave together Yep’s (2010) notion of thick(er) intersectionalities and Kraidy’s (2005) description of transnationalism to build my conceptual framework. On the one hand, thick(er) intersectionalities advocates for more complex and embodied ways of theorizing intersectional identities and “the interplay between individual subjectivity, personal agency, systemic arrangements, and structural forces” (p. 173). On the other, transnationalism helps make sense of transnational identities with “a shifting location of contradictions that straddles multiple viewpoints,” which cannot be defined “in binary and essentialist terms” (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017, p. 288). I thus examine why an in-depth, transnational understanding of Chinese identity is necessary and how to move toward such an understanding, including that of racial, cultural, linguistic, and political identities of transnational Chinese living in the U.S., especially in the context of the current trade tensions between the U.S. and China, two nations tightly connected economically while largely differing culturally and politically.

Methodologically, I employ a mixed-method approach by applying autoethnography and in-depth interview as my primary research methods. The dissertation mainly addresses three research questions through a communicative lens: 1) What does it mean to live in the U.S. as transnational Chinese? 2) How do transnational Chinese make sense of Chinese-ness(es) in such a context? 3) What is at stake in understanding Chinese-ness in a transnational context that necessitates an alternative theorization of race to the dominant/White U.S. race ideology?

The findings show that there is no singular definition of what Chinese-ness(es) is(are) and what it(they) entail(s). It is a thick and fluid concept that is unique to each transnational Chinese
based on their lived experiences and subjected to their own understandings while also
constrained in the larger social framework by Chinese and U.S. cultural scripts and contexts.
Chinese-ness, to transnational Chinese, cannot be compartmentalized in the limited identity
categories specific to either cultural context. Being exposed to a broader world with multiple
cultural references, they are flexible enough to creatively identify, dis-identify, or even counter-
identify with either their avowed identities, or ascribed identities, or both in either or both
cultural contexts. The complexities, specificities, and particularities of their transnational identity
experiences, thus, cannot be adequately understood within the confines of simple intersections of
U.S.-centric identity categories. I conclude that Chinese-ness(es) is local and global, racial and
ethnic, cultural and political, and spatial and temporal. There is no such thing as a singular,
uniform Chinese-ness. Not even in the imaginary.

This study may contribute to critical intercultural communication scholarship by situating
knowledge of race, identity, and power in a very specific and complex context that includes the
U.S. but is transnational in scope. Further, with an aim to provincialize dominant U.S. race logic,
it makes an effort to transnationalize and internationalize theorizing of race and identity. Finally,
speaking in a voice from a non-Western perspective currently situated in the West, I practice
self-reflexivity throughout my writing with the hope of avoiding re-essentializing identity, race,
and power in a covert “oppressor-oppressed” Manichean dualism that I attempt to deconstruct.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is mid-February 2021. Carbondale is experiencing a snowstorm and extreme cold that we have not seen for years. My heart, however, is full of warmth and melancholy. During the past five years at SIU, I have met many beautiful people who inspired me in many different ways with their love and brilliance. Although to embark on a new journey soon feels empowering, saying farewell to them and a place I took as my home for five years makes me sentimental.

Growing from a graduate student into a scholar with this “epic” dissertation project, I have received immense help from the SIU community, especially from my professors. First, I would like to address my gratitude to my academic adviser, Dr. Nilanjana Bardhan, for her professional guidance throughout my SIU journey. Nil’s high academic standard and attention to detail have enormously helped improve my research skills. Her little notes and adorable gifts on various holidays always brought me unexpected joy. I am very fortunate and grateful to have her as my adviser. I want to thank Dr. Sandra Pensoneau-Conway for her pedagogical philosophy and loving personality. Sandy is an example of integrating critical communication pedagogy into everyday communicative practice. She is the person I always feel open and safe to talk to whenever I encountered difficult teaching moments. I would also like to appreciate Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook for being such an approachable professor and kind human being. I have been touched many times by Craig’s soft and powerful personality. Whenever thinking of an academic mentor, I know for sure that Craig is always the one. My thanks also go to Dr. Craig Engstrom, whom I took a class with during my first summer at SIU. Craig is a technology-pro. He is very good at incorporating advanced digital touches in his teaching and management of classes. I have been impressed by Craig’s capabilities of motivating students to participate, and I stole some tricks from his class. I would love to acknowledge Dr. Alfred Frankowski, too, for his open arm
when I asked to sit in his decolonization class. Alfred has an uplifting spirit both in and outside the classroom. He is such a focused and passionate scholar that you may see him always in an engaged discussion with students, sometimes in the hallway, other times by the restroom, or even right outside his office with his hand still on the door handle. I loved sitting in Dr. Frankowski’s class for an unforgettable semester.

Eventually, I would love to thank my dear families and friends back home in China. I appreciate my dear brother, Hao, for many lengthy WeChat conversations out of his busy work. I also adored all those pictures he took of our families and my little niece, Niuniu. These loving moments reminded me that we are together while being geographically apart. My thanks also go to my confidants, especially Yan, who treat me as a sister. I am grateful for them taking care of my properties in Kunming. Because of them, I have been able to stay entirely focused on my studies here in the U.S.

My life here has been touched with love and luck by all of you. Thank God for bringing so many wonderful and beautiful souls into my life. Only with dedication and continuous achievements could I express my gratitude.
DEDICATION

To my dearest father, Mr. Zhang, Zhenghai, who had fulfilled his lived years as an illuminating guide, teacher, mentor, and companion with his unconditional love, trust, and sacrifice.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

An Unsettling Moment


Crossing national and continental borders into the U.S. is both a blessing and a curse. While the previous Obama administration offered Chinese international students a much-appreciated visa policy with an F1 visa validity period for five years, the trade war tension between China and the U.S. under the Trump administration has built up more barriers which impact many areas of our lives, including a much higher rejection rate for Chinese visa applicants to enter into the U.S and a shortened validity of the F1 visa if issued. Now, COVID-19, an unexpected black swan, has halted the regular motion of the entire world. Being the first place hit by the virus, China has been placed under the spotlight of a global blame game. The Trump administration, in particular, had been employing “China Virus” rhetoric since early March 2020 (Moynihan, 2020). Hostility and violence against Asian looking people in the Western sphere have been increasingly reported (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The “Yellow Peril” scare which had permeated in the U.S. newspapers and official documents since early 1800s has rejuvenated in today’s U.S. media fueled by State support. For example, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had made constant trips to spread China Threat messages among U.S. allies in the hope to stop them from doing business with Chinese companies, especially Huawei, the assumed 5G technology leader in the coming decades (Business Standard, 2020). The Chinese
consulate in Houston, Texas, was ordered to close in July 2020 (Fifield, 2020). Three Chinese scholars and a graduate student were shortly after accused of visa fraud by hiding their Chinese military ties in their visa applications (Redden, 2020). Then, a U.S. based software company TikTok was ordered to close or be sold to a U.S. company due to its accused data theft because its founder is Chinese (Allyn, 2020). The Zoom founder, a Chinese American, immediately announced his zero tie to China (Goh, 2020). Accused of taking U.S. American jobs, Chinese and Indian individuals working in high tech companies received death threat through mails asking them to return to their own country immediately. Otherwise, mass shootings would follow (Mitchell, 2020). Following this, the University of North Texas expelled 15 Chinese students and scholars funded by the Chinese government funding (The College Post, 2020). A few days after, over 1,000 Chinese nationals’ visas were revoked by the U.S. government due to claimed security risk (Hansler & Griffiths, 2020). Amid the COVID anxiety and discriminations, constant cases by the State targeting Chinese have aroused insecurity and fear particularly among Chinese scholar and student communities across the U.S. To many, their American Dream has abruptly turned into an American Nightmare. No long-term future plans can be made. The only choice is to focus on the business in hand right now. No one knows what is going to come next. I was recently caught by an upsetting sense of insecurity regarding whether I am still able to get the doctoral degree I have been working on for nearly five years, and whether it is still possible for me to find an academic position in the U.S. as a U.S. trained scholar due to my Chinese national identity.

There has never been a single moment in the past that I have had to watch so closely the inter-state politics between China and the U.S. to estimate its potential consequences over my personal life. It is as if things have been flipped overnight. Anti-China sentiment in the U.S.
mainstream media has suddenly rocketed high, competing with the terrorism rhetoric against Middle Easterners since 9/11 and the “illegal” immigration rhetoric toward Mexicans. Neither could I have imagined that one day during my lifetime I would become a concern for others’ national security just for being Chinese. In moments like this, I cannot help asking myself who I am and what it means to be Chinese in the U.S. in this troubling globalizing/globalized era.

**Crossing Borders**

Although the curiosity of interrogating my identity has always been there in my mind, it has not been until now that it has surfaced with such conflicting and nerve-wracking impetus. Globalization has enabled me to travel beyond national borders. It has also liquidated my identity in flux and in plurality. My Han Chinese identity within mainland China has been internationalized and re-anchored in the U.S. as I became an Asian (Sekimoto, 2014), a foreigner, a non-native English speaker, an international student, and a Chinese from the PRC rather than just a Chinese. Each of these newly gained identities groups me with some and splits me from others. The grouping and splitting occur with overlaps in an ongoing fluidity, both an inclusion and exclusion simultaneously, which reflects interconnected racial and national power plays as well as global politics. Navigating these identity shifts, I have developed a skill of swiftly zooming myself in as small as an international student while zooming out as big as an Asian (Sorrells, 2016). I have been made aware of my linguistic differences whenever I speak English. Moreover, even among people who speak Chinese, I have had to accept a rejection of my identity and the fact that my Chinese-ness is seen as different from that of those from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and diasporic Chinese communities, making the simple English word *Chinese* no longer adequate enough for these nuances. I have thus gained a consciousness of making distinctions between 華人 (*huaren*, cultural/ancestral Chinese, a more acceptable concept)
and 中國人 (zhongguoren, national Chinese, assumed to subscribe to Chinese Communist Party (CP) ideologies) when encountering those who to some extent identify as Chinese. To them, the “we” I assumed does not seem to make much sense most of the time in the transnational context. My heart feels sore whenever I notice their effort in trying to break ties with the Chinese-ness I have been prescribed. Luckily, my sore heart also shakes open a space for me to investigate what is at stake for being Chinese.

From beyond the confines of national borders, the world shows in front of me a very different picture from what I had previously known. This has enabled me to see myself from alternative, if not opposite, points of view as well as opened my heart to hear how people from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and elsewhere, although perceived as Chinese by mainland Chinese, define themselves in their own terms. On the one hand, to a great extent, we share the same cultural, linguistic, and racial heritage. To a similarly large extent, however, we diverge by walking on very different historical, economic, and political paths which can be traced back several centuries. Further, although we all share the collective memories of the pains of colonial sufferings and imperial occupation by European and regional colonizers, we experience, remember, and narrate such histories very differently. What is remembered by the mainlanders is decentered in other regions. Similarly, what is removed from the memories of mainlanders is of central focus to people of such regions. Besides, on the ladder of global economics, we are placed as “developed” and “developing” as well as “democratic” and “authoritarian” on the political spectrum. Linguistically speaking, moreover, although we all consider Mandarin the official language, the simplified Chinese characters used in mainland China to elevate literacy rate is considered by Mandarin users elsewhere a betrayal of Chinese tradition and cultural heritage—thus less Chinese. Ironically, using English everyday by people, from Hong Kong in
particular, becomes a defining character for their superiority. On the other hand, while celebrating the same Chinese traditions, our mentality has been shaped to operate differently after decades and decades, if not centuries, of separation. We are physically positioned in the Asia-Pacific region, but our desires and senses of belonging are sharply distanced/dichotomized.

It is hard to deny that the identity confrontations between mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kongers are an historical legacy of Western and regional colonialism infused by its norms and ideologies. These legacies have left China’s work of renationalization of Hong Kong (since its return in 1997) and reunification of Taiwan and the mainland (since the 1992 consensus) extremely unsettling and chaotic, especially due to the above-mentioned fact that China is under an authoritarian/communist regime while Hong Kong and Taiwan are in a Western style democratic/capitalist model, two seemingly sharply incompatible systems. The “new race” nurtured by the colonial rule and Western modernity in Hong Kong and Taiwan are instinctually hostile to communist China where hostility against the pro-independence/separatism sentiment in Hong Kong and Taiwan is also high.

Intriguingly enough, Macau, a previous colony of Portugal which was returned to China in 1999, has always remained quiet among these chaotic politics although it is administered, like Hong Kong, under the same “One Country, Two Systems” policy since its return. The amiable relationship between Macau and Beijing tells a very different story, through which I was only able to detect the nuances they respectively experienced with the colonial power and Beijing until I was geared with a transnational lens.

Together, though, in the context of the U.S., we are reductively categorized into the same racial group as Asians, along with other populations from Asia, including Koreans, Japanese, Filipino, Indians, Middle Easterners, and Vietnamese. Differences such as our bodily features,
linguistic characteristics, and national origins mark us as outsiders and perpetual foreigners, with some of us being labeled terrorists at certain times while others as the stereotypical “Model Minority” (Chou & Feagin, 2015; Museus & Kiang, 2009).

Being a Chinese living in a transnational context, where all these interpersonal (micro), intergroup (meso), and international (macro) relationships are more frequently visible and presently interconnected, I have witnessed and experienced in the first person some uneasy and conflictual identity struggles. In my understanding, as mentioned earlier, such identity struggles and crises are both a reflection of U.S. racial politics and a mirroring of geopolitics between the West and the rest of the world, in which China, the “Oriental” Other, plays a significant role. It has hence shaped my research topic for this current project.

**Transnationalism as a Framework**

In this research, I problematize the U.S. dualistic/binaristic race logic from a non-Western perspective by outlining its limitations in understanding race, identity, and power for perceiving difference simply as oppositional, upsetting, and inferior. I believe that ideologies about identity politics are more real than in identity discourses in that they penetrate into our everyday lived experiences. In a transnational context, identity ideologies are complex and multidirectional (Sekimoto, 2014). For instance, transnational Chinese people in the U.S. are subjugated through multi-colored Otherization due to differences including, but not limited to, their skin color, linguistic characteristics, and political regime practiced in their perceived homeland. Paradoxically, though, the transnational Chinese are known as One in a reduced, uniform Chinese-ness despite the nuances of their geographic and geopolitical locations, experiences, memories, imaginations, and particular histories. I argue that such a flat understanding of Chinese-ness not only veils the colonial histories the West has imposed across
different regions of China, but also glosses over the colonial relations within the Asia-Pacific region. It further shadows the differences within the Chinese themselves due to their (un)shared past, differing levels of economic development, complex cultural heritages, diverse political pursuits, and contradictory imaginations of homeland.

In order to challenge the way of “knowing who we are” (Sarup, 1996, p. 46) and to “rearticulate it in a new way” (Hall, 1990, p. 54), I proposed to make a decolonizing and more complicated understanding of Chinese-ness(es) by applying transnationalism (Kraidy, 2005) as a conceptual lens to provide an alternative theorization to U.S. binaristic understandings of race, identity, and power. Transnationalism allows us to think through and across national borders (Kraidy, 2005) with migrant subjectivity being “a shifting location of contradictions that straddles multiple viewpoints,” which cannot be defined “in binary and essentialist terms” (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017, p. 288).

Known in Chinese as 中國/中国 (zhongguo, the Middle Kingdom) (Yan, 2016), China used to be where my perception of the world was primarily situated. It is a location of enunciation from the center, rather than the margin. Spoken as the 普通话 (putonghua, the common or standard language), Mandarin Chinese is the only universal language I know used in public schools among over 200 Chinese languages spoken by the 56 ethnicities across China. As a member of the dominant Han ethnicity which occupies over 90 percent of the Chinese population, my mobility within China feels like a fish comfortably swimming downstream (Sensoy & DeAngelo, 2012). My identity had always been transparent. Never would I be questioned nor doubted because of the way I speak, dress, or walk. As both a concept and an identity experience, “race” did not exist in my consciousness. What I recognized were ethnicity and class, by which people are categorized into 56 different groups and in a bifurcating city/rural
binary. I was brought up knowing minorities to be primitive and backward, which necessitates their being educated in our Han schools. I was also taught that people from rural regions are poor and dirty. In contrary though, the media constantly iterate that all 56 ethnicities are all brothers and sisters within one big Chinese family although the fact is that most of them are officially labeled as minorities. My mind, my psyche, and my body have been trained to navigate, by ignoring, these naturalized power relations hidden in the “transparency” of my dominant Han membership, my comfort in speaking Mandarin Chinese, and my powerful viewing position from high above. Similarly, growing up in the relatively peaceful and prosperous post-Open-Door1 China (Xu & Li, 1990), I experienced no serious tensions between China and other nations except for those in the history textbooks and mainstream media. I thus couldn’t even imagine that one day my national identity as Chinese may be a cause of concern in any sense.

However, my arrival in the United States shifted the narratives I was familiar with. It dramatically and in an embodied way relocated me from the center of one culture to the periphery of another. From the 7:1 exchange rate between RMB and USD, I started to experience the economic consequence of geopolitics in person by planning my living focused primarily on what I needed rather than what I wanted as before. I became sensitive to my skin color as it constantly tells my racial Otherness (Said, 1978) against mostly White bodies. Moreover, I have to speak English only, the others’ language. Although my language proficiency was officially proved with IELTS and GRE scores, it is interpersonally judged by my accent. My legal alien identity was approved by an F1 visa stamp on my passport. My given name was reversed in front of my family name. My memories of China retreated to the margin to create space for centering

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1 China’s open door policy was initiated by Chairman Deng, Xiaoping in 1978. It moved China from the previous isolation from the rest of the world into a fast developing modern country, which has drastically lifted China’s economy and people’s living conditions in the past 40 years.
my new U.S. narratives as a foreign wanderer. My capability and former transparency has been transformed into inadequacy and invisibility, overshadowed by the powerful normativity of the U.S. dollar, mostly White bodies, and the U.S. American, mainstream White, accent. I began to live within “Otherness” at multiple levels, especially racially and linguistically.

While reflecting on the taken-for-grantedness of my Han Chinese identity within mainland China, I find myself caught in the multi-layered identity struggles of living on the racial landscape of the U.S., where my understanding of what it means to be transnational Chinese is complicated with dominant/White U.S. race ideology as well as morphed forms and variations of these ideology. To my understanding, this ideology has greatly contributed to producing knowledge for people from the global South of who they are on the U.S. racial landscape. Take the transnational Chinese population as an example. In one sense, they (un)shape the ethnic/national identities among Chinese from different parts of the Greater China Region by bifurcating them into a binary of Taiwanese/Hong Konger vs Chinese. In another, as a racial group, their racial identities mark them as an Other against U.S. Americans, thereby forming another binary of mainly White vs non-White. Transnationalism contributes to complicating identity, culture, and power through multiple standpoints and positionalities.

**Thick(er) Intersectionalities as Fabrics**

In addition to transnationalism, I have found thick(er) intersectionalities (Yep, 2010, 2016) another insightful conceptual lens that helps weave layers of identity fabrics into the understanding of culture, power, and geopolitics. Initiated by feminist scholars, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Sorrells, 2016) transforms our understanding of identity from singular, isolated constructed categories into plural, interconnected networks, in which both people’s struggles and privileges operate interdependently to complicate our everyday lives. Intersectionality has
provided us with a powerful lens in understanding our identities primarily within the U.S. national context. However, in a transnational context, the concept of intersectionality needs to be expanded to include more nuanced transnational identities. Therefore, the lens of thick(er) intersectionalities has drawn my interest as it looks at more “complex and embodied ways” (Yep, 2010, p. 173) of thinking about intersectional identities through interrogating power in all social relations. Further, the lens of thick(er) intersectionalities also focuses on the exploration of nuanced particularities of individuals’ lives and identities including but not limited to their race, class, gender, sexuality, and national locations in concrete times and space, which make these individuals identify, dis-identify, and/or even counter-identify with prescribed identities (Yep, 2010).

Taking the shift of my understanding of Chinese-ness for instance, my initially firmly-held assumption as a mainland Chinese of a unified Chinese identity shared by all Chinese, both domestically and overseas, was abruptly challenged after my moving to the U.S. not only by what I read in the U.S. publications and what I see on the U.S. campuses but also by the different ways that many transnational Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong define themselves. In many of the academic and popular publications, Taiwan and Hong Kong are ascribed as a nation, an equal entity, as the PRC, which may seem politically controversial to the majority of Chinese nationals, who are educated in mainland China and who recognize Taiwan and Hong Kong as an inseparable part of the PRC, the only legitimate China. On the contrary, however, wording such as “Hong Kong, China,” while considered normal by the mainland Chinese, may “upset” many Hong Kongers (Hui, 2019) due to their pro-independence sentiment. It is no wonder that I got so confused when I first saw the “national” flags of Hong Kong and Taiwan hanging in the recreation center on my campus. To me, the “national” flags on the U.S. campus signaled a
blatant separatist motive, which stimulated my negative visceral reaction. However, I now believe that these flags may provide a powerful assurance for international students from Taiwan and Hong Kong to reclaim their avowed political and national identities in the global context, though controversial.

Furthermore, the challenge of my assumption of a unified Chinese identity may sometimes become heightened in my actual interpersonal encounters with Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong. For example, once I had my student Hsuan introduce himself in my public speaking class. His name is 軒 in traditional Chinese (used in Taiwan and Hong Kong) and 轩 in simplified Chinese (used in mainland China). Although the two characters share exactly the same pronunciation, they spell quite differently. Hsuan 軒 in Taiwan’s tongyong system while Xuan 轩 in the pinyin system of mainland China. While he was introducing himself, I spelt Xuan on the board. With a puzzled face, he replied, “I don’t know what that means! I’m Taiwanese, not Chinese!” My heart ached with his blunt response. For a moment, my mind lingered in blank without knowing how to respond. I felt my Chinese-ness was denied. With a second thought, however, I was also wondering whether that was actually Hsuan’s resistance to my marginalization of his linguistic identity by wielding my power as the instructor. He might have felt denied as well in my spelling of his name in the mainlanders’ way, a concern and resistance shared by many Taiwanese to the prevalence of simplified Chinese in Taiwan’s linguistic landscape (Curtin, 2015). Hsuan went on introducing himself to the class. “I don’t eat rice.” He broke the stereotype. His peers laughed. “Instead, I prefer bread, butter, and spaghetti!” They were amused again. “My country [ROC, in Taiwan] is very democratic and international. Many Westerners come visit and become residents.” He was well received. I stood in the middle of the classroom, smiling outside while twisted inside, pondering over the split, puzzling identities
between the two of us. Weeks later, I met Hsuan in a gathering organized by the local Chinese community, where he shared with his mainland Chinese friends that he has an ancestral origin in Shandong province in eastern China. Hsuan, who claimed his national identity as Taiwanese in a context with Westerners’ presence—the classroom, a more “global” context, admitted his ethnic Chinese identity in a context devoid of Westerners—the Chinese gathering, a more “local” context. Location and context are key to how we avow our identities and these are by no means fixed.

Similar identity controversies are very present among Hong Kongers as well. Francis Hui (2019), a student at Emerson College, recently published an article in the student-run newspaper The Berkeley Beacon titled “I’m from Hong Kong, not China.” She claims that her home is “a city owned by a country that [she doesn’t] belong to” (Hui, 2019, para. 1). In the article, she traces the colonial occupation of Hong Kong by Britain between 1842 (1841, in fact) and 1997. She laments their compromised rights on democracy, voting, freedom of speech and publication since Hong Kong’s handover in 1997 to China. As a further advocacy, she also speaks for the female Tibetan student leader at Emerson who encountered huge backlash from other mainland Chinese students against her pro-independent orientation on Tibet. The article draws loaded comments, divided into two camps with one being pro-independence of Hong Kong and the other pro-renationalization of Hong Kong. Members of the first camp take pride in their Hong Konger identity and accuse mainlanders of being “low” and “uncultured” for using simplified rather than traditional Chinese characters. Interestingly, however, this seems to me a strong evidence for their pride in Chinese identity, which is considered by them as being in danger with mainland Chinese’s practicing simplified Chinese. In fact, if put into historical context, both traditional and simplified Chinese characters used in different regions are merely two of many
styles of Chinese characters throughout the linguistic evolvement of Chinese language. Both types of characters, to me, are adequately Chinese but practiced in particular spaces due to various historic reasons. Neither of them is less or more Chinese as their differences merely mark the fluidity of linguistic development and variations of identities.

**Shattered & Entangled Identities: One into Many, Here into There**

The crises and struggles of such disidentification (Muñoz, 1999) expressed by transnational Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong used to be something beyond my naïve understanding of the Oneness of Chinese identity formed in mainland China. The border-crossing has unfolded in front of me alternative scenes of how Taiwanese and Hong Kongers define their own identities and picture their desired ways of life, and this has shattered my shackled beliefs into pieces and reformed my understanding of Chinese-ness(es).

From the One to the split many, Chinese-ness is no longer a unified One. The term China (zhongguo, 中国/中国) or Chinese (zhongguoren, 中国人/中国人) no longer holds fast as China can mean many different things, including an ancient empire lasting thousands of years and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) which excludes Taiwan, known as the Republic of China (ROC, 1912-1949). However, as a governance entity, Taiwan, the “exiled ROC,” has continued to exist even if it does not always receive international recognition, especially by its counterpart the PRC, since the end of China’s Civil War in 1949 when the Nationalist Party (KMT) retreated to the Taiwan Island. Similarly, “Chinese” now may either refer to a person of Chinese descent or a person with PRC nationality against which many Taiwanese and Hong Kongers feel strongly. Both terms are lexically vague and politically arbitrary, and no longer able to capture identity nuances among people with Chinese origins. Thus there is a need to advance our cultural understanding toward a more nuanced distinction between華人/华人 (huaren, person of Chinese
descent), 中国人/中国人 (zhongguoren, Chinese national), 華裔/华侨 (huayi, foreign citizen of Chinese descent), and 華僑/华侨 (huaqiao, overseas Chinese citizen) (Lary, 2015, p. 256).

Interestingly, I have also found that the ideologies applied by the Taiwanese and Hong Kongers to dissociate themselves from Chinese seem to be based on a West/non-West dichotomy. For instance, Hsuan takes pride in his Taiwanese identity due to Taiwan’s being modern and international for its democracy and being a favored residence of Westerners. In other words, to Hsuan, adoption of Western democracy and presence of Westerners are a proof and confirmation of Taiwan as a more advanced society compared to the mainland. Consistently, Hui’s Hong Konger identity can also be linked to her desire for voting and freedom of speech and publication. In addition, many followers of Hui in their comments derogate mainland Chinese as “uncivilized” for not using “proper” English in their comments. It is not difficult to discern that practicing democracy and using English, to many Taiwanese and Hong Kongers, equals a better and more civilized people or nation, which is assumed to be absent in mainland China.

From an interethnic perspective, on the other hand, although华人/华人 (huaren, persons of Chinese descent) identify themselves differently from within the group based on political, cultural, economic, and emotional reasons, they are inevitably compartmentalized in the same category as transnational Chinese, if not Asian, when they cross national and continental borders to live in the U.S. Their split avowed identities, once again, are ascribed into a unified group, a different “race,” measured by the U.S. White/non-White race binary, under which transnational Chinese are either welcomed as Model Minorities (Chou & Feagin, 2015; Museus & Kiang, 2009) that set an example for other minority races, or Otherized as dangerous and as “Yellow peril” (see the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act) that brings threat to U.S. society. Quite frequently,
as well, as a racial Other, transnational Chinese are also seen as forever foreigners and inadequate English speakers along with other Asians. Under such an umbrella race logic, Taiwanese and Hong Kongers oriented with a pro-West mindset by adopting democracy are also subject to the racial, national, and linguistic exclusion as mainland Chinese who are assumed to subscribe to communist ideologies. The difference, though, is that mainland Chinese are faced with more layers of struggles for coming from a non-democratic/authoritarian political system. That means they are deemed not only as a racial Other (Yellow Peril), but also a political Other (from Red China) and a Gray Other for living in such an ambiguous continuum, in which they can be accepted as Model Minorities but still rejected as perpetual foreigners. In other words, the Western ideologies Taiwanese and Hong Kongers apply to Otherize/decentralize mainland Chinese are exactly what Westerners apply to Otherize/marginalize them on the U.S. racial landscape.

Moreover, non-Whites in the U.S. are frequently targeted as criminals subject to racial profiling, African Americans in particular. As a notorious legacy left unsettled in the U.S. history, African Americans are frequently publicized as criminals in mainstream media to an extent that Blacks nearly equal to criminals (Oliver, 2003). Criminalizing non-White racial groups has also become a convenient way to construct conventional rhetoric on national security. In very recent cases, for example, soaring nationalist sentiment mixed with xenophobia toward “Mexican illegal immigrants” has shifted some of the fear and hatred previously directed toward “Middle Easterners” who were constructed as “terrorists” due to the 9/11 attack. Now, with the ongoing Sino-U.S. trade war launched by the Trump administration, rhetoric targeting the Chinese as a new and looming threat to the U.S. national security for their “spying” on the U.S. and “stealing” of U.S. intellectual properties has been placed on the forefront competing with
those toward Mexicans and Middle Easterners. Measured against Western norms, China’s different governing style and “state-controlled” market economy are seen as a threat to the West and a phenomenon that will compromise Western democracy and capitalism in the long run. Mainstream media in both countries are fighting against each other in fueling nationalist sentiment with oppositional metaphors, such as “Us vs Them” and “Good vs Evil” (Sorrells, 2016). Criminalizing the Chinese has added a new layer to the identity of transnational Chinese in the Gray Other continuum, which can be swiftly utilized as needed from Model Minority to perpetual foreigner and then other times to criminal.

At the same time, Trump’s “America First” mentality encountered backlash from Xi’s refusal to “surrender” in the trade negotiation as the past colonial humiliation still looms high in the collective memories of the Chinese. The ongoing confrontation has resulted in a renewed racism worldwide toward people of Chinese descent. Fears have been growing among Chinese academics working in the U.S., STEM fields in particular, after three Chinese American medical professionals at the Texas Cancer Center were ousted over “data theft concerns” (Associated Press, 2019) and two Chinese American professors at Emory university were fired and deported for “hiding’ grants from China” (Hu, 2019). Both cases are believed to be a leverage used by the Trump administration to manipulate trade deals with China. Under this climate, all Chinese are targeted, including Taiwanese and Hong Kongers due to their 华人 (huaren, person of Chinese descent) identity.

**Unsettling Moments Continued**

Global citizens with highly interconnected ties and more and more ambiguous identities have been challenged by Westerners’ protectionist fear of outsiders in today’s globalizing world. For a Chinese, having a U.S. passport and working for the U.S. for decades still cannot guarantee
their allegiance. Their ancestral origin and racial difference become an insurmountable barrier marking them as a forever outsider and continue to keep in place the sentiment that gave rise to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. As mentioned above, Emory University recently closed the lab led by two distinguished Chinese American professors, the couple of Dr. Li, Xiaojiang and Dr. Li, Shihua, after they had worked 23 years as tenured professors there. With the “China Threat” rhetoric, robberies and attacks committed on people of Chinese descent have enormously increased in Western countries. Even Chinese international students, long seen as a piggy bank for the economies of many Western countries, are more and more concerned about their safety living in the West after over a dozen Chinese students attending Warwick University were attacked recently (Hall, 2019). Clashes between new global ways of life and old narrow understandings of culture and identity have made our interconnected world suffer from splits and sorrows.

As the interdependence between nations, cultures, finances, labors, and consumer goods continues to deepen, conflicts and tensions embedded in each global player’s cultural values have been increasingly contested and intensified. With closely-knit ties and interconnectivity, global policies primarily made by global North nations mainly based on Western values and interests on today’s global stage have witnessed strong backlashes by global South nations, most of which used to be European colonies where collective memories of colonial rule are still palpable, especially when entangled in political and economic conflicts as a sovereignty.

Being a transnational Chinese in the United States crossing the former colonial divides, I have witnessed in recent years constantly increasing protectionism in the U.S. and soaring nationalism in China. Thus I cannot stop wondering whether our identities can be comprehended in a more complex while flexible manner, and whether such understanding can be gained by
situating ourselves in a shifting context from angles straddled in multiple positionalities. Although with continuous orientation, re-orientation, and disorientation across such “borders,” “vertigo” may accompany (Sekimoto, 2014). Neither can I stop dreaming of whether we may one day achieve a more “complex communication” between peoples, cultures, and nations through locating oppressions not only from outside but also from inside ourselves (Lugones, 2006). With such complex communication, we may envision a shared world with a more prosperous and hopeful outlook instead of continuing to repeat the troubling superior/inferior binary in an already highly-divided while deeply-mingled world.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter I (Introduction), I discussed how crossing national borders makes me aware of the many identity borders that I have crossed as a transnational Chinese. I started recognizing my racial being in the U.S. and it penetrated into my everyday life through language, skin color, ways of living, and even global politics. I was also caught in identity politics between the “Chinese,” who do not necessarily identify as Chinese in the transnational context, which surprises me and also makes me curious about the meaning of Chinese-ness on the U.S. racial landscape.

Chapter II (Theoretical Framework) traces dominant/White U.S. race ideology back to the European construction of race based on biological features. I also discuss in this chapter how the dominant U.S. race logic has shifted in the current globalization era from race as biology into newer discourses of race as culture and race as class. I then point to the limitations of dominant/White U.S. race ideology in the hope to achieve a more complex understanding of transnational identities, which leads to a discussion on the necessity of an alternative and more nuanced theorizing of race in the globalized context. In making a specific case, I narrate the
multi-layered identity negotiation of transnational Chinese living on U.S. racial landscape. By elaborating on the two conceptual lenses of transnationalism and thick(er) intersectionalities, I then unpack the complexities of identity struggles of transnational Chinese from different locations, in relation to different Others, embedded in different histories and memories. This attempt to decolonize the understanding of Chinese-ness serves as a “talk-back” to U.S. binaristic race logic by offering an alternative, not replacement, theorizing of race through understanding identity, culture, and power through a transnational lens.

In Chapter III (Methodology), I provide a rationale for applying mixed qualitative methods of autoethnography, face-to-face interview, and written interview in my research. I further rationalize how my cultural and researcher identities have informed my methodological choices. Next, I discuss the assumptions of each method. I also explain the strengths of the mixed-method approach by how they are able to remedy some weaknesses of each method if applied separately. The last section of this chapter outlines specific steps I follow in conducting the research, including sampling process, recruitment of interviewees, data collecting process, and data coding process.

In Chapter IV (Data Analysis and Findings), I share narratives of my participants’ transnational lived experiences regarding their identities related to China/Chinese according to the final codes. These 12 final codes, i.e., themes/categories, are categorized into two large groups. The first group serves RQ1 (What does it mean to live in the U.S. as transnational Chinese?) and RQ2 (How do transnational Chinese make sense of Chinese-ness(es) in such a context?). The second group serves RQ3 (What is at stake in understanding Chinese-ness in a transnational context that necessitates an alternative theorization of race to dominant/White U.S. race ideology?).
In Chapter V (Conclusion), I recapitulate the research topic of my dissertation and revisit the conceptual framework through which it works. Then I briefly reiterate the key findings from the data set. Lastly, I reflect on some of the limitations of this dissertation and offer some possible directions to enrich this topic in future research.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TRANSNATIONALISM AND THICK(ER) INTERSECTIONALITIES

Dominant/White U.S. Race Ideology

Living within the U.S. racial landscape means struggling with racial inequality under White supremacy (Yep, 2010). Once a person of “color” enters into the U.S., she can no longer return to the “innocent” state of being who she used to be; nor could she pretend to be carefree from the incomprehensible racism imposed on her body and consciousness. She first will notice at the most sensory level the hierarchy of skin tones; she then will feel the concrete disciplinary power penetrated into her colored days and nights that have “judged, condemned, abandoned [her] cultural forms, [her] language, [her] food habits, [her] sexual behavior, [her] way of sitting down, of resting, of laughing, of enjoying [herself]” (Fanon, 1964/1967, p. 39). After ruminating followed by a sudden realization, I came to an understanding that Western colonialism makes a country racist where racism is performed and morphed in the most mundane elements of its colonial root, which I am by no means able to escape. Where there is racial hierarchy there is racism. I thus have to “fling [myself] upon the imposed culture with the desperation of a drowning [woman]” (p. 39, emphasis in original). As an object of racism, I become no longer the individual subject but a reduced “form of existing” (p. 32).

U.S. racism is always hidden in its morphing. It constantly changes, keeps renewing and adapting itself from “old-fashioned” racism to a more polished and coated racism while the blatant racism can still be seen dotted on the blanket of the covert racism (Fanon, 1964/1967). As Fanon (1964/1967) poignantly pointed out, racism is never an “accidental discovery” (p. 37). It “haunts” and “disfigures the face of the culture that practices it” (p. 37). The racial construction
has a mysterious power to make the “inferior” Other mimic the oppressor to “denying itself” as being different from their own race and to identify with the values, customs, and acts of “the superior” (p. 38). In order to better understand dominant/White U.S. race ideology, I will briefly explore in the following the concept of race, the European construction of race, and how racial discourses in the U.S. have morphed into culture and class in the context of globalization.

Race.

Although no evidence has been found to support biological races, the idea of using race to describe bodily variations and subdivisions of the human race still persists. Historically, the concept of race entails multiple meanings ranging from “one’s nationality, religion, ancestry, regional identification, or class status to biological subcategories within a species” (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2014, p. 1). Human history has witnessed repeated stories of different groups of humans migrating, mixing, and settling (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2014). There have always been certain groups of people attempting to “distinguish themselves” through differences such as linguistic, religious, geographic, and physical differences (Sorrells, 2016, p. 60).

However, it is the trained human capability of signifying meaning on human bodies that have enabled the significant role that biology plays both historically and in today’s social life (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2014). Race thus is utilized to differentiate people and create social hierarchies (Sanjek, 1994), where White supremacy is naturalized in nearly every level of human interactions such as personal consciousness, socializations, relationships, institutional rules, and cultural and social norms (Yep, 2010). Race, as a social category, is therefore significant across the world not only in our cultural life but also political life (Winant, 1994). It plays a fundamental role in global politics and culture as well (Sorrells, 2016). Race has constituted capitalist economy and nation-state as well as penetrated into all social identities, cultural products, and knowledge making (Sorrells, 2016). Yet, not until the European colonial era during
the past five centuries was the construction of race established, by which people are compartmentalized in “races” according to their biological features and the arbitrarily ascribed characteristics such as mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual capacities were inscribed. In North America, in constructing the White with European descent as the standard, people of different color were racially signified as the “Other”—the lower and inferior race—by the “one-drop” rule if there was even one single drop of non-White blood in their body. This racial marking process legalized White supremacy while excluding all Others (Sorrells, 2016, p. 61).

**The European Construction of “Race.”**

   The colonizer and the colonized are paradoxically interdependent. Without the colonized no colonizer could ever exist (Bhabha, 1994; Sarup, 1996). Constructing the colonized as an inferior “race” thus necessitates the construction of the “Other.” Social construction of “race” is not only a matter of “difference” but concerning a relationship of power—body politics (Sorrells, 2016, p. 62), in which structurally supported White norms are constructed as an ideal measure (Yep, 2007). Such norms and values are continuously repeated and elevated as the only, the right, and the best way of social life, subsequently being promoted as a universal measure upon other cultures (Sorrells, 2016, p. 68).

   In order to justify their domination and exploitation, European colonizers established colonial control over a vast majority of the global landscape through conquest, colonization, and capitalism (Sorrells, 2016). First, military conquest and economic oppression paved the foundation for racism (Fanon, 1964/1967; Sarup, 1996). Second, unilaterally normalizing White cultural values over the cultures of indigenous people (Fanon, 1964/1967) through texts and knowledge production (Said, 1978) helped solidify racial hierarchies between the colonizer and colonized (Sorrells, 2016). Third, the upgrading of the means of production camouflaged the
techniques of exploitation and prevalence of racism (Fanon, 1964/1967). Similar to race as a human construct, racism is not a given of the human spirit but a structural deposition (p. 41).

With the identities, cultures, and bodies of people on the lower ladders of racial hierarchy being apparently and constantly marked as “having a race” (Yep, 2010, p. 172), the omnipresence of Whiteness thus appears unmarked while always directing its gaze to identify the “Others” against the White self as the One human race. However, the constructed bodies of color not only creates the meaning, but justifies a hierarchical labor system and the legitimacy of slavery (Sorrells, 2016, p. 62), for which the colonizers had to prove scientifically that biological superiority and inferiority among races are natural which often leads to “vulgar racism” (Fanon, 1964/1967, p. 35). The indigenous, the colonized, however, witnessed and experienced devastated cultural values and ways of life as well as devalorized language, dress, and techniques, the result of which are their destructed “social panorama” (p. 33), crushed/emptied values, and subjugated knowledges (Foucault & Ewald, 2003). The colonizers, as the producer of the colonial texts, however, continue to occupy the heights of manufacturing “truth” and maintaining systems of inequity and domination (Sorrells, 2016, p. 63).

Through five centuries of colonization and its continued manifestation, White supremacy was historically established, institutionalized, and systematically operated by exerting exploitation and oppression over lands, countries, and non-White peoples to maintain established wealth, privilege, and power (Sorrells, 2016). Thus, Othering is not only a practice at the national level, but also operates through “supranational distinctions, nascent regional distinctions” between the West and the rest of the world, resulting in the centeredness of Europe as the civilized Self while the non-Christian and non-White nations become designated as the uncivilized “Other” (p. 61).
Race in the Context of Globalization: From Race to Culture and Class.

Since the early 19th century, numerous anti-colonial, anti-imperialist struggles and movements in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, as well as civil rights movements in the U.S., have challenged the “myth of race” and White supremacy which has exerted a traumatic impact on non-White populations across the world. Race thus has been subsequently reconstructed in more complex, fluid, and contested ways (Sorrells, 2016, pp. 64-65). For instance, the earlier biological determinism, or “racial naturalism” (Theo Goldberg, 2006), which placed a focus on the biological traits of people, has now morphed into “racial historicism,” the focus of which has switched from biological to a seemingly more progressive idea of color-blindness, which conveniently sways racism to cultural determinism by assuming that non-White peoples and nations lack “cultural development” or “progress” and thus need the Western education/cultivation (Sorrells, 2016, p. 65).

On the one hand, this sliding strategy is also noted by Fanon (1964/1967) who asserted that racial hierarchies are marked first by whether a group of people have a culture, then by whose culture is better, and finally through “cultural relativism” (p. 31). Similarly, Yep (2010) contends that race is always more than merely about race itself. As Whiteness always already hinges upon other socially constructed categories such as class, gender, sexuality, and nationality, race cannot be comprehended only through itself. Rather, it requires an examination of the ways it intersects with these categories to stimulate particular kinds of social subjectivities and lived experiences. Embracing the argument of many prominent scholars, I disagree with the racial historicist notion that regards the U.S. as a raceless, post-racial, or color-blind society. Instead, I see this morphing strategy of rearticulating race as culture to be a political move to purposefully normalize and mask the long lasting inequity, exploitation, and uneven power relations that have continued from the colonial past (Sorrells, 2016, p. 66). Furthermore, the
strategy of reconstructing race as class merely serves as a blanket strategy by covering up racial hierarchies behind the class gap. Under this mask, non-White people who climb up the class ladders are seen as a proof of a raceless society. Race is thus believed to no longer exist and what matters is believed to be “the color of money” (Sorrells, 2016, p. 68). Such strategy works to domesticate non-White people to accept, perform, and support, thereby internalizing dominant White norms. Essentially, both strategies are a form of “cultural Whitening” rather than the end of racism. The rearticulation of race as culture and/or class paves the road for an invention of discourses such as “raceless, post-race, and color-blind society” by neglecting the intersectionality of identity operations and by hiding the devastating effects of such social categories on the lived material experiences of marginalized people across the globe (p. 69).

Nowadays, racism has become more covert and one has to detect it with one’s inferential capability. The post-racism discourse provides U.S. society with an “elixir” to assist people to neglect the “icky historical abomination” of racism and to move on in a “mental habitus of preracial consciousness” that they will never be able to return to (Ono, 2010, p. 227). Postracism discourse is thus an illusion for its negation of history and being constitutive of oppression by diverting focus away from existing racism. Whether or not Obama was elected as the president, racism still exists as a robust reality in U.S. society, although postracial discourse attempts to minimize it. As well, with its “systemic, transhistorical, long-lasting, and continuing effects” (p. 228), slavery is far from over as long as phenomena such as the “prison-industrial complex” still flourish in the U.S. (Davis, 2011).

Necessity for Alternative Ways of Theorizing Race

Ono (2012) critiques U.S. identity/race politics as absurd due to its lack of social, economic, political, and cultural contexts. There thus is a growing need for an alternative
rearticulation (Hall, 1990), especially given the fast-changing racial landscape of the U.S. Carrillo Rowe (2005) calls for an alternative envisioning of our belonging by advancing a “reverse interpellation” (p. 16). Keating (1996) also advocates for an openly political and creative/imagined theory that allows for knowing the world with heightened awareness by “occupying theorizing space” from within to change the world where marginalized populations are dehumanized and objectified by the established norm (p. 6). Using threshold theory of identity, Keating (1996) challenges us to reflect and extend our own understanding of personal identity and social locations, and to reject unitary top-down ascribed identities.

To develop alternative theorizing of race is to come up with language and theory that situate identities which do not go along neatly within national borders regarding race and that bear “transformative potential of complex intersections” across cultural/historical/national perspectives on race (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017, p. 288). In response to such calls, I attempt in the following to elaborate the reasons why dominant U.S. race logic is limited and why an alternative theorizing of race is needed in the current context of globalization and transnationalism when actual and virtual border crossings have become more of a norm, if not a necessity.

**Globalizing World vs. Universalizing Dominant/White U.S. Race Ideology.**

The world has changed. Our modern social life is extensively defined and distinguished by the globalizing forces with fast developing networks of interconnections and interdependencies (Tomlinson, 1999), within which intercultural connectivity and proximity are exponentially magnified and intercultural conflicts and contradictions are intensified to an unprecedented degree (Sorrells, 2016). Boundaries between the global and local are constantly mixed, blurred, and contested. We are living in a globalizing and transnational world in constant motion. As Sarup (1996) indicates, whether we virtually or physically cross national borders, our
increased mobility and plural existence makes us all nomads and wanderers frequently crossing multiple borders.

However, the current world is also a world with colonial and racial legacies where identity and culture are contradictorily experienced and confronted between mobile cultures and peoples in the flood of globalization (Weedon, 2004). In the U.S., this is epitomized in the need to maintain White privilege (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017) through the White/non-White race binary and the demoralizing experiences through which border-crossers are absorbed into the all-consuming existing racial system (Collins, 2010; Drummond & Orbe, 2010; Joseph, 2015). As Hall (1990) points out, identity belongs both to the future and to the past. It is not only a constant transformation in flux, but also a product in certain historical and transnational contexts (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017) which can never be completed or guaranteed (Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka, 2002).

The limits of dominant U.S. race politics thus rest in its “conservative imagination” (Ono, 2012, p. 144), the violence of which finds its root in its authoritarian will to spread its standardized ideology universally while neglecting the fact that it may be centrally relevant to people in other parts of the world (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017). Further, it also negates the locality of identity politics (Hall, 1997). By establishing a clear divide between the White and non-White, dominant U.S. race discourses gain meaning, and the divide starts to bear material consequences (Ono, 2012). However, the marginalized, with a damaged psyche, have to live in trauma and loss with stripped identity and subjugated knowledge about their Self as an inferior Other (Hall, 1990). Indeed, dominant U.S. race logic is constructed and maintained based on, rather than relational, a “Cartesian notion” of an “atomistic and individualistic” self by seeing its Self as the source of knowing, decoding, and making (Sarup, 1996, p. 62). This orientation
operates with more and more inconsistency in the highly connected and relational world today in the context of globalization.

Survival in today’s world of uncertainty and diversity can be realized only through recognition and preservation of each difference, with the center, if there is one, acknowledging that its arbitrary existence is contingent on the margin as well (Sorrells, 2016). Such deconstruction not only demands careful attention to specificity and avoid falling into binaristic logic traps (Warren, 2008), but also requires “provincializing Whiteness” (Yep, 2010, p. 174), which entails learning from the assumed “barbarians” (Yan, 2016) by internationalizing (Cheng, 2014) and transnationalizing race theorization via locating dominant U.S. race logic as provincial (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017).

**Complicating the Understanding of Race.**

Without close interrogation, the notion of race may seemingly function well in addressing “questions of origins” and creating “social legitimation” for certain similarities or irreconcilable differences (Yan, 2016, p. 1229). For example, under dominant U.S. race logic, the notion of “people of color” still affects the way we are treated and treat others and continues to maintain the binary between the White and non-White. Similarly, the current macroracial groups such as Asian, African, White/Europeans are essentially remnants of the outdated biological racial inventions that shadow the specificity and diversity of the “component populations” (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2014, p. xxii). It is “arbitrary, artificial, and subjective” to divide human beings into biological races like plants and animals (p. 5), which is a tendency inherited from the European and Christian view to see the world as “fixed” and never to be changed since its creation by God. In addition, the use of race is always confusing. For instance, racism toward Muslims conflates racial identity with religious identity (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2014). Similarly, racism toward Asians confuses racial identity with geographical location.
As mentioned elsewhere, as a “floating signifier” in the mobile world of today (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017, p. 289), race is never just about itself (Yep, 2010). Its specific “symbolic and material consequences” imposed on different groups of people at different levels during different times in different spaces are always manifested and experienced distinctively (p. 172). Such consequences either “majoritize” or “minoritize” bodies both in predictable and unpredictable ways (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017, p. 289). For instance, transnational bodies of “color” often find themselves dehumanized and pushed into “the coloniality of race” (p. 289) in settler colonial sites. Dominant U.S. race logic renders them “residing uprooted” among multiple conflicting and constantly contesting cultural and national narratives (p. 287).

Fortunately, in the arbitrary construction of race also hides its “re-signifiable potential” (Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka, 2002, p. 320). Race, as a contested domain, is open to contextualizations that are situated within certain historical traditions and power relations and attending to sociological and temporal forces (Ono, 2010). Race can no longer remain as a unilaterally defined notion based on dominant/White U.S. race ideology, which produce and implant absolute knowledges in the consciousness of the Other (Yep, 2010). Additionally, transnational bodies of “color” always already live their racialized experiences intertwined with other identity markers or social categories at micro, meso, and macro levels simultaneously, which also demands a resignification of race as more than just a reductionist biological signifier. For instance, Han (2014) illustrates how Chinese immigrants live their racialized experiences with intersectional complexities in which a plethora of identities play a role including their nationality, linguistic capital, race, immigrant status, religion, and generation/age. It is worth noting that language also operates as a terrain of Han’s consideration when examining race. Further, seeing belonging as emotional (Cheng, 2014), Cheng (2014) explains emotions such as
anxiety, suspicion, anger, hostility, affinity, and hope have become another terrain to contextualize race. With the increased interest in transnationalism’s impact on racial/ethnic constructions, research attention has extended to the ways in which racialization, working along with other social markers, is lived into the affective terrains of transnational bodies.

As a side note, with an awareness of the hegemonic role of English and U.S. academic influence in the intercultural communication scholarship, I shall clarify that these terrains on which theorizing race is made are only a partial list without taking into account scholarship that is yet to be published, literature written in other languages, and research studying other racial contexts across different continents.

**Multi-Colored Otherness of Being Chinese**

Despite its impact on domestic identity politics, dominant European/U.S. race logic also establishes structures of oppression globally and has built a West/the Rest divide by denying the humanity of the Other via ideological terms such as progressive, modernizing, civilizing, Christian, democratizing, and developed (Weedon, 2004). Language not only reflects but also shapes reality. Through such highly value-laden and racial language, the ideology/truth opposition, in a Marxist sense (Sarup, 1996), is veiled. As “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1975/2012) bestowed with a given identity, we are “hailed” by such social institutions (Althusser, 1971) and taught to learn who we are (Sorrells, 2016). With the Rest being silenced, the West is constantly speaking, and constantly speaking us (Hall, 1990), by which its power, domination, and colonization in the “post-”colonial world continue. My own lived racialization in the U.S. as a transnational Chinese serves as one illustration of this loudly speaking interpellation (Althusser, 1971).
Becoming Transnational.

After the initial excitement for a new life on this entirely foreign land, I have curiously discovered that in the U.S. I am seen as “a person of color” both in everyday communication and academic discussion. This obtrusive consciousness makes me aware that without a clear sense of race, one has no identity in the U.S. (Winant, 1994). But, who is not a person of color? Even White, the norm and standard, is a color which has been made transparent/invisible. The norm and standard. Contrasted against it, transnational bodies from the global South are frequently reminded of their identities being “downgraded” under the White/non-White U.S. binaristic race logic as their bodies move across geographic, racial, and cultural borders (Shohat & Stam, 2014).

Besides the racial and linguistic difference, my national origin being China also plays a key role into my outsider-ness in the U.S. Coming from China, I am not only made (or become) a person of “color” in the U.S. (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997/2012), my body is also deemed as alien (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017) and foreign. Interestingly enough, I even find myself a member of the mythical “Model Minority” group (Chou & Feagin, 2015; Museus & Kiang, 2009). These labels operate together to make my body an ambiguous existence (Keating, 1996). I thus realize that in the U.S. my differences are constructed and signified negatively in service of regulating such differences and maintaining the power of Whiteness (Ono, 2012). That is how I have been so constantly caught up as an outsider, a linguistic foreigner, a racialized but “well-behaved” Other; at the same time, I am also gradually becoming a suspicious, potential “thief” and/or “spy,” and even a “Chinese virus” in the current political rhetoric triggered by the current Sino-U.S. trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic. By conflating difference to an oppositional signification (Deleuze cited in Warren, 2008, p. 295) and constructing “alien” as invading national borders (Ono, 2012), U.S. society suffers bitter anxieties (Collins, 2010; Omi & Winant, 1994;
Silverstein, 2005) in the ongoing process of maintaining White privilege (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017).

According to McWhorter (2010), “racism is a dispositif, a vast institutionalized apparatus of power” with great capability of repeating and reinforcing itself (p. 67). It is adept at adjusting to new forms to fit the changing definitions of race. It is multifaceted and stubborn. Foucault and Ewald (2003) once also contended that race never sticks to its biological meaning. Instead, it is a discourse that is able to circulate with “a great aptitude for metamorphosis, or a sort of strategic polyvalence” (p. 76). The battle of race can be conveniently utilized as a means to distinguish between “us” and “them” by rallying forces to exterminate those defined as alien (McWhorter, 2010). For instance, non-White immigrants, international students, foreigner workers in the U.S. have been violently and constantly attacked by state power and mainstream media.

Through various “mechanisms and institutions, policies and procedures” (McWhorter, 2010, p. 75), biopower is adopted by institutional power to achieve “the subjugation of bodies and the control of population” (Foucault, 2008, p. 140) to protect and strengthen the nation, i.e., “our” race. In current situation, this may help us comprehend why Chinese alien students and Chinese American scholars are repeatedly portrayed by the state spokespersons as “spies” whose purpose to study and live in the U.S. is for “intellectual theft” so that to protect U.S. national security their visa being revoked and themselves deported is justified. How can the perpetual foreigner become “loyal to the Crown” (McWhorter, 2010, p. 72)? Biopower requires racial dividing practices to conveniently justify who should be sacrificed and whose resources and basic rights can be taken while whose should be protected and guaranteed. State violence against Hispanic/Latinx and Middle Eastern bodies would be another example.

When White race is given a state recognized social status, a normalized citizenship, and a
legit identity, persons not being an “English, Saxon, Caucasian, Nordic, Aryan, etc.” (McWhorter, 2010, p. 71, 76), i.e., not being White, must be a racial degenerate, a germ that “[has] infiltrated the society” that should be immediately identified and removed before they contaminate and destroy the society (p. 68). The state, thus, must perform its duty as the “protector of the integrity, the superiority, and the purity of the race” (Foucault & Ewald, 2003, p. 81). Therefore, deprivation of liberty for those who are considered racially deviant is legitimized. Those who are not racially “allegedly best” (e.g., the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) are automatically boxed into members of an underclass with “illness, the filth of poverty, thievery and violence, illiteracy and ignorance,” thereby becoming contaminants to be “held responsible for the disease and corruption of an otherwise healthy social body” (McWhorter, 2010, p. 76). Such rationales prevail in the “Yellow Peril,” “Red Scare,” and “Chinese Virus” type rhetoric.

Multi-Colored Otherness.

It is within such context that I have become intrigued to examine more closely my lived multi-layered Otherness while navigating the U.S. racial landscape as a transnational being. The term “multi-colored Otherness” is both a conscious personal choice and a negotiated/oppositional reading (Sorrells, 2016) against dominant/White U.S. race ideology. It also refers to the deeply hidden, widely spread, penetrating, contagious racist webs I am entangled with as I walk, read, write, speak, drive, eat, shop, and surf the Internet. The inescapable cold looks and condescending attitudes I experience daily have slowly become cemented in my consciousness and triple identity awareness that pushes me to reconceptualize my Chinese-ness(es). The word “colored” is used here both as a verb and an adjective, meaning a process of construction and a state of being, referencing a logic of because we made you a person of color, you are a person of color. This term is used to talk back to dominant/White U.S.
race ideology which not only reshape my consciousness but also transform it into an alternative articulation. Such reconceptualization and rearticulation are primarily informed by critical intercultural communication scholarship, postcolonial studies in particular.

The sweeping White U.S. race ideology has a particularly significant impact for transnational Chinese in the U.S. on knowing who they are. According to Lan (2007), transnational Chinese Americans are faced with an interwoven web of “overlapping racializations:” as foreigners who are “taking over the nation” like the Hispanic/Latinx; as a people of “color” like African American; and as “Model Minority” like neither of them (p. 84). I argue that, while perceived as a people of “color” in a uniform Chinese-ness, the “color” connotated in the Chinese-ness has always already been plural. Transnational Chinese are constructed as Yellow, Red, and Gray to fit into the needs of the America First rhetoric. They are people of “colors,” or, multi-colored Others.

The color spectrum cast upon Chinese-ness is narrating a never-ending story inherited from the colonial past through the “post-”colonial/imperialist present. The objectifying, racially coded term “Yellow Peril” patronized the Chinese as a threatening colonial Other to be eradicated (e.g., the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act; see Bardhan & Zhang, 2017; Sorrells, 2016). Besides, with an imagined root/home in communist China, where U.S. style democracy is not practiced, the Chinese are Reddened by assuming that all Chinese are mainland Chinese and that all mainland Chinese must subscribe to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideologies. In addition, entangled with an ambiguous identity, the Chinese are caught simultaneously in the “Model Minority” myth and marked as both a stranger and perpetual foreigner (Dhingra, 2007; Nakayama, 2012) regarding their geopolitical location and unpredictably “accented” English. I thus coin this way of using a blurring continuum that houses the “Asian” identity category as
Gray colored Otherness. Further, due to the Chinese central government’s atheist orientation and anti-Christianization sentiment (Chang, 2018; Huang, 2014, & Yang, 2006) as well as the assumed “intellectual theft,” the Chinese are portrayed as immoral “thieves” and/or dangerous “spies,” a criminalized Other who are sent to sabotage U.S. technological, military, economic, and homeland security, adding one more layer to the Gray Other continuum.

Through multi-colored Otherization, transnational Chinese in the U.S. are reduced to a population with a flat Chinese-ness, a questionable “race” with remarkable racial, economic, political, linguistic, behavioral, and cultural differences contradicting dominant White U.S. American standards.

**Decolonizing Uniform Understanding of Chinese-ness through Transnationalism & Thick(er) Intersectionalities**

A uniform and flat understanding of Chinese-ness not only veils the colonial legacies the West has imposed across different regions of China, but also glosses over the colonial relations within the Asia Pacific region. It further shadows the differences within the Chinese themselves regarding their (un)shared past, stages of economic development, cultural heritages, and political pursuits. As Weedon (2004) argues, identity issues are indeed issues of power while power limits the possibilities of identity. In today’s globalizing world where colonial legacies are still prevalent, identity and belonging are brought into question in the so-called “post-colonial” and “post-modern” world. European colonizers penetrated their race ideologies to differing degrees into cultures partially or fully conquered. Race ideologies in such colonies are thus coded differently (Loomba, 2005; Mukhopadhyay, Henze, & Moses, 2014) although with an obvious Western influence. Therefore, when bodies of “color” move across national/cultural borders, they confront race ideologies that are both locally specific and reflect larger colonial ideologies.
in nuanced ways (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017).

In order to disrupt the colonial binary distinction of Self and Other, we must find ways to “unsettle and restage” difference in the context of globalization where image and capital flows are enacted (Shome & Hegde, 2002a, pp. 174-5). We must also rethink old power relations by recognizing the differential positioning and resource distribution across different nations in the global South and global North. Shome and Hegde (2002b) also encourage postcolonial researchers to go beyond colonialism associated primarily with Britain and Europe to study other colonial contexts and alternative histories by resisting taking the geographical scope of postcolonial studies as a “given” (pp. 255-6). In embracing their advocacy, I attempt to incorporate theories of transnationalism (Kraidy, 2005) and thick(er) intersectionalities (Yep, 2010, 2016) into my research as they provide invaluable insights into decolonizing the understanding of Chinese identities.

On the one hand, transnationalism offers us a more flexible understanding and complex performance of our identities. It encourages us to move beyond geographic or national confines in our thinking. It helps to “map subjectivity, mobility, and identity shifts” across multiple spaces simultaneously (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017, pp. 288-9). By challenging and transforming universalized meanings and experiences associated with various identities, transnationalism allows us to move from and into multiple directions and live with multiple contradictory narratives with border crossings. On the other hand, according to Yep (2010), thick(er) intersectionalities focuses on more specific and “embodied ways” of thinking about intersectionality by recognizing the omnipresence of power in all social relations. Further, through a “thicker” exploration, we should be able to achieve a multi-layered understanding of more complex and nuanced particularities of individuals’ lives and identities in specific time and
space, which include but are not limited to “their race, class, gender, sexuality, and national locations” (p. 173). Further, this conceptual lens also gives special attention to the intersectional relations between “individual subjectivity, personal agency, systemic arrangements, and structural forces” (p. 173).

With these two conceptual lenses in focus, I organize my following theorizing into three sections: domesticating Chinese-ness vs. globalizing Chinese-ness; lived/performed Chinese-ness vs. imagined Chinese-ness; and Chinese-ness vs. Chinese-ness(es). However, it is by no means that I would simply think they are clear-cut, mutually exclusive separations. Rather, I see the “-es” already deeply rooted in the construct of Chinese-ness as a notion with many layers of contestations experienced by different individuals and entities, at different times and locations, both locally and globally. In addition, Chinese-ness(es), as a troubling identity construct, is inconsistently constructed and reconstructed, reinforced and resisted, consolidated and transformed, and will continue to be rearticulated and resignified.

In addressing the complex intersections of different perspectives on race through cultural, historical, and national lenses (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017), I shall acknowledge early that while historically Chinese-ness has been a negative racial construct developed by different local/regional/global powers, it has simultaneously been self-constructed to maintain its oppression over its racialized/cultural/“national” Others within its power confines from antiquity to present.

**Domestic Chinese-ness vs. Globalizing Chinese-ness.**

**Race in the China Context.** I crossed national and cultural borders only to discover my racial identity in the U.S. Prior to this crossing, I used to be aware of my transnational experiences only as 中国入 (Zhongguoren, national Chinese) instead of as 漢族 (hanzu, ethnic Han), which, to me, was only relevant in the context of China and which I did not live as a “race” due to its
naturalized normativity. 種族 (zhongzu, race) in China is perceived as an “objective” and “inherent” status with a “stable” dimension based upon “biological traits” (Yan, 2016, p. 1226). Influenced by European Orientalists, Chinese nationalist and revolutionary elite Zhang Binglin conceptualized Han race as “the civilized” which is different from “uncultured” barbarian races. Zhang further borrowed the Japanese notion of 民族主義 (minzuzhuyi, racism) and combined it with 国 (guo, nation) to give a nationalist view based on race (Cheng, 2014, p. 4). Nation building through nationalism thus was granted a racial foundation in China. Race, ethnicity, and culture have since then been combined with China’s “nation-building project,” which equalized race, state, and Confucius culture (Cheng, 2014, p. 4). As the central player in overthrowing the Manchurian Qing Dynasty in 1911, Han people established the Chinese Republic (Cheng, 2014, p. 4). Chinese as a “race” with shared blood lineage was then constructed (Leibold, 2011). Later, being Chinese has shifted to a politically charged subscription to the ideologies of the CCP since Mao took the power in 1949. Chinese-ness thus has become “political performance” (Cheng, 2014, p. 4) while remaining simultaneously a racial, ethnic, Confucian, and national identification.

Taiwanese, Hong Konger, or Chinese? It is with such socialization that I found my Chinese-ness constantly challenged by friends or students from Taiwan when they claim to be Taiwanese rather than Chinese. I felt betrayed. Taiwan, an old colony of Spain and the Netherlands in 1600s and then occupied by Japan in 1890s, is seen as “the motherland’s treasure island.” It is a place that my father had been emotionally attached to but had never been able to visit due to the cross-strait complications. My father was born in 1946, one year after Taiwan’s return from Japan’s 50-year imperial occupation. Three years later, in 1949, when the Civil War ended, the

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2 Though the Chinese Civil War was known as a 4-year war during 1945 and 1949, conflicts between the KMT and the CCP began with the KMT’s attacks on the revolutionary CCP as early as 1927, shortly after the CCP was
Kuomintang (KMT) nationalists retreated to Taiwan due to its defeat to the CCP communists.

The ROC (Republic of China), as a temporary historic period (1912-1949) for the mainlanders, has continued to exist and thrive in Taiwan. However, in the eyes of the PRC (People’s Republic of China), only one sovereign China can exist. The ROC, like a suspending threat, thus has become a taboo in the PRC despite the fact that the founding father of the ROC has rested in the national forest park of Nanjing, a mainland city and the previous national capital of the ROC, and is commemorated by people from both sides. Tensions between the two sides had continued till 1992 when the “One China” consensus\(^3\) was reached and business and tourism across the strait were resumed (Wei, 2016). However, the pro-independence orientation of Tsai Ing-wen, the current president of Taiwan, a DPP (Democratic Progressive Party) member, has lately become a trigger of the heightened tensions between Taiwan and Beijing. The PRC perceives her as a separatist and traitor to the 1992 consensus.

Entangled with past colonization, WWII, and the Civil War, the Chinese-ness/Taiwanese dichotomy is not only an historical legacy but also entails different cultural and political belongings which are not unanimously shared by the two sides across the Taiwan strait. “One man’s imagined community is another man’s political prison” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 6). Portrayed as a disobedient child to the mainland, Taiwan has become a “political rival” but “intimate economic partner” to mainland China (Hussain Bukhari, 2016, p. 25). Economically, mainland China is now Taiwan’s largest and most invested market (Li, 2015). Politically, however, two polarized appeals held by both sides have increasingly alienated them from each other (Hamrin established. In 1937, facing Japan’s massive invasion, two parties united to fight against the Japanese imperial armies till Japan surrendered in 1945. In general, the Chinese Civil War primarily include two phases: 1927-1937 and 1945-1949.

\(^{3}\) Also known as the “1992 Consensus,” a term created by the KMT politician Su Chi. The consensus was reached in Oct. 1992 between representative of the ROC and PRC upon an agreement that both sides operate under the One China framework but with different articulations (一中各表): whether it be the ROC or PRC, there’s only ONE China. Both sides agreed that the unification of China is the ultimate goal.
Wang, 2006). While Beijing wants to maintain a “father-son” relationship with Taiwan, Taiwan sees cross-strait relationship as one of “brotherly” or “neighborly” between two equal governance entities (p. 345). In fact, the ROC, founded in 1912, is much older than the PRC, founded in 1949. Furthermore, for the mainland, Chinese-ness implies “territorial integrity” and a “unified China” (p. 344). For Taiwan, on the contrary, pursuit of political integrity is its primary goal, which is later marked by its identity shift from 中國人 (Zhongguoren, Chinese) to 台灣人 (Taiwanren, Taiwanese). Linguistically, although using traditional Chinese characters in Taiwan feels “more Chinese” (p. 342), Taiwan takes it both as a maintenance of Taiwanese identity and a resistance to Chinese-ness against the mainland’s influence with its simplified Chinese characters flooding Taiwan (Curtin, 2015).

Compared to Taiwan, Hong Kong (1841-1997) and Macau (1887-1999) are seen as “prodigal sons returning to the father” (Hamrin & Wang, 2006, p. 345) from over one century’s colonial separation by the British and Portuguese respectively. Instead of celebrating the re-nationalization as Macau, however, Hong Kong remains ambivalent and resistant to Beijing after its handover in 1997 (Kit, 2014). Looking back, with its modernized urban landscape and higher living standard, Hong Kong served as a center for manufacturing as well as financial and professional services (p. 26). Since then, Hong Kong, as a past colonized Other, has started to see China as an “alien, backward, chaotic Other” (p. 26) suffering endless turmoil during those troubling decades, such as the Chinese Civil War, Japan’s military invasion (1931-1945) and occupation of Manchuria (1932-1945), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and Tiananmen Square Student Movement (1989). To people from Hong Kong, China as a cultural and economic home is more acceptable than China as a political belonging (Kit, 2014). They negotiate an ambivalent Chinese national identity by claiming a “Pan-Chinese-ness” for their
identification with Chinese cultural traditions, Chinese folklore, and ethno-cultural ethos while alienating themselves as Hong Kongers to resist the standardized national education, the cross-border flow of population, and the decreased local provision of goods and services due to the flooding presence of mainlanders (p. 25).

On one hand, the British strived to plant in the minds of native populations in Hong Kong the idea that prior to the colonial rule their own culture was barbaric (Sarup, 1996). Due to colonial education, younger generations in Hong Kong who did not personally experience the colonial atrocities, are taught to hold a condescending and hostile attitude toward their neighbor, the “Communist China.” Without knowing much about contemporary China while being taught at school with the colonial texts, a few generations in Hong Kong have a deeply rooted, internalized colonial sense of supremacy when looking at China and what it entails. Understandably, the consequence will be a chaotic aftermath as in most colonies following colonizers’ departure (Mbembe, 2001). Relationships between Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China have been extremely complicated. To Beijing, decolonization, including building connection through sharing China’s positive changes and adding Chinese contemporary history, social affairs, and governance system in its education, is a failed task due to its lack of experience in handling postcolony and people living on it that are far different in many aspects.

Hong Kong’s return, therefore, to many, is only a legal not an emotional return, a return of its body not its heart. The failure further blocks the path to the real renationalization of Hong Kong and reunification of Taiwan, given the fact that Taiwan looks very closely at Hong Kong as an example and foreseeable future for itself. It is clear that renationalization requires not only a political and territorial decolonization but a decolonization of colonial mentality (Sarup, 1996, p. 151). However, along the colonial divide there are always a colonizer and a colonized
(Bhabha, 1994) both from outside and from within. When encountering foreign colonial powers, China plays its role as the legitimate government to reclaim its colonized territory of Hong Kong due to colonialism and divided territory of Taiwan due to both colonialism and civil war. However, on the post colony, not only the territory but the population matters. The already colonized population may deem themselves as a new people with new identities and new envisions of a different future, thus resisting renationalization.

Further, to Taiwanese of the ROC, their history is longer than the PRC and it should be them who renationalize the mainland. On ROC’s constitution, its territory even reaches out to include the current state of Mongolia, which sought its independence from the ROC with Russian assistance eventually in 1924. To be transferred from a more developed colonial power to a less developed power, albeit local (in Hong Kong’s case), or from a more progressive power to an authoritarian power somewhat foreign to them (in Taiwan’s case), resistance surely would follow. Such resistance and Beijing’s desire to reclaim the territory thus create tensions, which leads to strong nationalism on each side, especially on the mainland. To Hong Kong and Taiwan, the mainland’s nationalism may mean oppression and potential attack, a quasi-form of colonization from within, whereas to the mainland, nationalism in Hong Kong and Taiwan manifested by their discrimination of the mainlanders is internalized racism through colonization.

Loomba (2005) warns that “internal colonialism is a feature of the formally decolonized world as well as of formerly settler colonial societies” (p. 254). She sees previous colonialism and today’s global capitalism as two overlapping forces working through the nation-state to encroach the world’s natural and human resources. Take Hong Kong for example; it has been the world’s financial center for many decades and always enjoys its magnificent images on world
media coverage. Although most of the world’s biggest transitional corporations have their headquarters in Hong Kong, they use Hong Kong just as a port to transfer their wealth. The wealth gap between the rich and the poor runs on the top of the world. Having the most expensive housing prices in the world and home to some of the most successful business moguls and richest movie stars in China, a large percentage of its population still live in 石屎森林, concrete ghettos. Encroached by global and local capitals, local resources of Hong Kong mostly flow through but never stay in the hands and pockets of ordinary Hong Kong people. Many families with four to five people have to squeeze in a common space of only 10 square meters in size (about 100 square feet). Young generations find no hope for a better future, which is probably the primary cause for the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Protest with the bill itself the blasting fuse rather than the real cause. In addition, as an important cultural analytic, geopolitics also plays a big part in the dispute of Hong Kong and Taiwan with the mainland. Hong Kong serves as a key center for intelligence exchange and profit making for many Western powers including the U.S. and U.K. while Taiwan is a strategic port for U.S.’ first island chain strategy to contain China. Therefore, there seems to be a triangular hierarchical power play between the U.S., Hong Kong/Taiwan, and Mainland China. This probably is also why the Trump administration continuously issued legal orders on Hong Kong (the White House, 2020), Taiwan (Chen, 2020), let alone Tibet (PTI, 2020; Wong, 2018) and Xinjiang (Zengerle, 2020), usually using human rights as a tactic, although the U.S. has no sovereign legal rights over these regions.

Obviously, though, Beijing’s hegemonic power in its political, economic, and military domination in the area have posed a looming threat to Hong Kong and Taiwan, making it even more difficult for the two “sons” to show willingness of surrender to their fierce “father.” Pro-independence motives in Taiwan and anti-CCP sentiment in Hong Kong mixed with economic
struggles from the grassroots class have become more visible and spoken in louder voices as they grow stronger and more independent, especially when gaining support from the West, including its previous colonizer and the U.S.

However, it is also worth noting that neither Hong Kong nor Taiwan is a place with unified appeals. There are many different voices existing in both places, including pro-mainland forces and standoffish groups besides anti-mainland voices. Even within anti-mainland groups, many are fighting for freedom of speech and a certain level of autonomy rather than seeking independence. Political climates in both places are also changing. For example, recently in Taiwan, despite its long existing discrimination towards mainlanders and mainland spouses of Taiwanese (Friedman, 2010), their discriminated treatment during the Covid-19 pandemic (Siying, 2020); the ban of pro-mainland Zhongtian News (Teller Report, 2020); the approval of imports of additive-fed U.S. pork despite protest (Reuters, 2020a); and potential lift on the food import ban (Mainichi, 2016) on food from Fukushima, a nuclear disaster polluted region, have placed the Tsai Government in a shaky position and herself being labeled as an “elected dictator” by the Asia Weekly (Wenmu, 2020). Further, Tsai is also suspected by its opponent, the KMT, to purposefully remove ROC while promoting Taiwan as a country by renaming airlines, schools, and changing the image of the passport cover (Aspinwall, 2020). Interestingly, media discourse also plays into the geopolitics within and without these regions. For instance, Taiwan’s news media and public discourses have continuously used “Wuhan Virus” on their media and public address. This, understood by many as a stance to flatter Trump, makes Taiwan a potential “51th state of the U.S. full of Trump supporters” as jokingly commented online by many mainlanders. Of course, the mainland is offended and fights back immediately, including refusal of entry to Taiwanese visitors whose test results are marked with the derogatory term “Wuhan Virus”
In addition, the mainland now is also working to improve relations with people from both Hong Kong and Taiwan, amid military intimidation toward Taiwan lately, by launching the Great Bay Area plan to connect Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Hong Kong, Macau, and some neighboring cities into an enormous economic and technologic center housing a population of 70 million in total. It can be seen that many Hong Kongers have already started to travel, find work, buy homes, and retire in these relatively cheaper mainland cities. To Taiwan, as well, in order to build better connection, Beijing has issued over 280 incentives, in recently years, to attract Taiwanese to work, live, do business, and study in the mainland, which is interpreted by Taiwan as “measures to lure Taiwanese” (Everington, 2019).

**The Chinese Self / Other.** According to Said (1978), the “Orient” is both the richest [European] colonies and part of European material civilization and culture. In fact, it also plays the roles of the cultural rival and most recurring images of the Other in the eyes of Europeans (Said, 1978). Zooming out (Sorrells, 2016) to an international level, China is thus frequently perceived as an “Oriental” Other. In the U.S. imaginary, for example, China exists as a museum piece lost in antiquity, a Cold War enemy, as well as an authoritarian nation but somehow managing to turn into a “modern, quasi-capitalist powerhouse” that poses a threat to stable while declining “western-style superpowers” (Ono & Jiao, 2008, p. 406). In an “epic Manichean dualism” (p. 406), China is imagined as being torn by an archaic regime which is inferior to Western culture and incapable of mastering fast, comprehensive modernization, thereby thirsty in taking advantage from the U.S. and West.

As a partial European ex-colony, the U.S.’s discursive enemy, and the world’s cheap labor factory, the Otherness embedded in Chinese-ness also finds its root in the Asia Pacific
A century ago, as Suzuki (2005, 2007) notes, Japan portrayed China as an “uncivilized” Other in order to present itself as a “civilized” power to the European states, which later provided the moral foundation for legitimizing its imperialist invasion in China (Suzuki, 2007, p. 42). Further, with China’s rapid rise, Japan’s relation with China has become a national central focus (Suzuki, 2015). However, nationalism is closely knit to Japan’s national identity (Japanese-ness). China has thus been portrayed as a realistic, bullying threat to both the Japanese Left and Right. This is a sharp contrast with its previous image in Japan as a victimized Chinese Other due to Japan’s imperialist invasion, to whom Japan, as a “victimizing Self,” owed a huge moral debt (Suzuki, 2015, p. 97).

On the other hand, on China’s side, the atrocious history of Japanese imperialism is deeply embedded in Chinese collective memories, which has always been a big footnote in China’s national identity construction (Suzuki, 2007). In addition, Japan practices “historical amnesia” to downplay its responsibilities for the past wrongs done in China. In order to construct for the younger generations a more positive national image of Japan (Suzuki, 2007, p. 42), Japanese public figures constantly deny its war crimes by promoting revisionist views of this history. This notorious legacy has also fortified China’s construction of Japan as an “Other” (p. 39). This provides further psychological justifications for China’s foreign policy making.

Moreover, Japan as a “victimizing Other” also facilitates China to construct itself as a “moral, but victimized” Self to resist its ambivalent image in the U.S. dominated international society as an “undemocratic, human-rights-abusing state” (p. 42).

It is worth noting that identity construction involves a “complex process in making nationalism” (Loomba, 2005, p. 191). While nationalism can be utilized to fight against the colonial power, as in the Chinese-ness constructed as opposing to the Japanese “Other;” it can
also be appropriated to be a “colonist version of the past,” as in the Chinese-ness constructed based on the Han race by subjugating certain minority ethnic groups within China, including Tibetans and Uyghurs. Additionally, national identity construction is always a dynamic process with multiple Selves and Others co-existing simultaneously (Suzuki, 2007). For example, the U.S also appeared as an “Other” in Japan’s political discourses for having unfairly taken away Japan’s autonomy and preventing it from establishing its own national identity (Suzuki, 2015, p. 96). Similarly, in China’s discourses, its multiple “Others” in addition to Japan during different historical phases include but are not limited to the U.S., the former Soviet Union, and Vietnam (Suzuki, 2007).

As discussed earlier, race politics always projects from the local while local racial constructions inevitably operate internationally with global influence. Besides China’s domestic racial/ethnic/national identification, Western media also carry the influence of European/U.S. racial construction into China (Pfafman, Carpenter, & Tang, 2015, p. 554) which impacts the ways Chinese see themselves and Others. For instance, racism by Chinese netizens, who see themselves as victims of foreigners, throw racist slurs toward Africans living in China, which complicates identity crises of the Africans at multiple levels: racism experienced in Africa, in the West, and in China. Further, issues of sexism, xenophobia, and stereotyping, upon which racism hinges, are also frequently witnessed in the non-Western context. In China, for instance, such isms always have their “political functions” to play, including legitimizing national identity construction, and covering criticism of the structure by scapegoating foreigners for domestic social issues (Pfafman, Carpenter, & Tang, 2015, p. 540). With perpetrators’ identity hidden as netizens, the Chinese perpetuate violence and social injustice online by Othering Africans who live in China.
Lived / Performed Chinese-ness vs. Imagined Chinese-ness.

“We came from the Central Plain!” Grandpa used to tell me, “the Yellow River Plain.” As an emotional belonging, Chinese-ness to my grandpa is filled with “affinity and hope” (Cheng, 2014, p. 4). However, to me, it is an imagined belonging (Loomba, 2005, p. 183) as I never lived there. Positioned in different locations, understanding of Chinese-ness by different Chinese is not necessarily unanimous, which sometimes leads to misunderstanding, confusion, and frustration even anxiety, suspicion, and hostility (Cheng, 2014). For example, the southwest border of China where my home province is located used to be derogated as 南蠻 (nanman, southern barbarian) hundreds of years ago although it is now the backpackers’ mecca in China for its natural beauties and vigorous ethnic traditions. Being Han Chinese residing there with 25 ethnic minorities, we seem to have an origin to return to, the Middle Kingdom, the imagined home, where the Chinese civilization originated. Differently, northern nomads such as the 匈奴 (Xiongnu, Huns) and the 蒙古人 (Mengguren, Mongols) have always been in tensions with the Han due to their past conquests of parts of China. Their differences in physical features, attire, religions, traditions, and even their long names all mark their Otherness and alienation from Han even after they have lived in China, as minorities, for centuries (Yan, 2016).

When identity is partly internalized as “performativity,” it becomes “part of lived subjectivity” (Weedon, 2004, p. 7). According to Cheng (2014), whose study shows the contradictory and complex characteristics of Chinese identities, Chinese-ness is not only a racial and political construct, but also a “proximity experience” (p. 4). For instance, one of the participants in her study said that her Uyghur friend from Xinjiang shows an “adventurous spirit” which is “unthinkable” to her as Chinese (p. 4). Otherness can be produced through spatial, geopolitical, and historical parameters, which may also simultaneously carry affective senses of belonging and non-belonging (Shome, 2010). In the U.S., for example, I sometimes perform my
Chinese-ness by wearing qipao (Manchurian traditional dress), reading Cangyangjiacuo’s (a famous Tibetan poet, the 6th Dalai) poems, and watching stories about Afanti (Efendi, a smart Uyghur boy in kids’ cartoon). I appropriate in my performed Chinese-ness characteristics of the Manchurian, Tibetan, and Uyghurs while not being aware of their absence and exclusion in the construction of Chinese-ness. In the past few decades of my life, I have never pondered why Uyghurs have been transformed gradually while suddenly in the media from the lovely boy Afanti into potential terrorists and separatists, the “internal foreigners” in their own homeland (Cheng, 2014, p. 4); why Tibetans have morphed from the previous “saved slaves” by the CCP into violent religious extremists and separatists; and why Manchurians from falling Royal members into disappearance with their “natural” and “successful” assimilation into Han culture. On the contrary, I know them only through tokens (like how I am known by U.S. Americans) such as Uyghurs’ kababs, Tibetan herbs, and Manchurian qipao that has already become a “traditional” Chinese/Han dress. While their imagined Chinese-ness has never been heard, their lived Chinese-ness in domestic and global stages are probably primarily known either through a tourist fetishizing gaze or their subjugated barbarian Otherness. Our lived/performed Chinese-ness and imagined Chinese-ness at multiple levels display painful chasms with us all being Chinese but bordered with the Han/non-Han identity logic. As Han, I am protected by this logic and it thus becomes invisible to me.

**Chinese-ness vs. Chinese-nesses.**

As Ngeow and Ma (2016) observe, Malaysian Chinese Muslim students see themselves as both Muslim and Chinese. They feel more Islamic but no less Chinese (p. 2108). Thus, a dualistic or “either-or” logic in understanding Chinese-ness(es) is at best reductionist for its removal of all the complexities and particularities. Chinese-ness(es), as a plural identity construct, is not all-inclusive, but an “ambivalent positioning that is fluid and multi-layered
within the larger frame of socioeconomic and geopolitical relationships” (Cheng, 2014, p. 4). For instance, once I went to a T.G.I.F. dinner party at Brandeis University when I was a Master’s student there. A Chinese friend asked to borrow my passport for wine. I apologized and refused. She was embarrassed and upset. I was upset for upsetting her. We both failed to perform the right Chinese-ness based on each other’s different imagination. For me, I am not only a Chinese, but also a Chinese Bahá’í, for whom drinking is forbidden. At the same time, I want to be a legal Chinese alien, for whom lending one’s ID to others is illegal. For her, however, Chinese-ness at that moment probably means altruistic support when another fellow Chinese is in need. My not lending my passport to her as my performed spiritual and legal identities for my Chinese-nesses, to her, might merely mean absolute selfishness, a trait that is absolutely violating to her version of Chinese-ness.

Chinese-ness(es) is, therefore, both an Other and Self. It also points to multiple Others and Selves. It is liberating for some while suffocating for others. It is oppressed while oppressive. It is local and global, racial and ethnic, cultural and political, spatial and temporal. It is firm while fluid. It consolidates and contradicts. It liberates while contains. It articulates and is rearticulated. There is no such thing as singular, uniform Chinese-ness. Not even in the imaginary.

In the following section, I provide my rationales for why this study qualifies as a communication studies project. Identity and culture can be studied from various disciplinary locations and perspectives, but communication studies takes a disciplinary-specific approach to the subject matter by focusing on the communicative dimensions of a study. My rationales thus touch upon such dimensions including symbolic, relational, and intersubjective nature of identity construction.
**Communicative Dimensions of Identity and Culture**

This study is focused on the interconnected relationships between identity, culture, and power. As an intercultural communication scholar, I subscribe to the view that identity and culture are mutually shaped and co-constructed over time through personal and collective narratives and discourses where power play is always inevitably involved, whether it be political, economic, military, or ideological. In the following, I discuss how identity, Chinese-ness(es) in this case, is communicatively performed, lived, constructed, reconfigured, and resisted symbolically, relationally, and intersubjectively. I base my argument on perspectives from symbolic interactionism, relational identity politics, and intersubjectivity.

**Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Identity.**

According to Mead (1934/1967), individuals and society have a mutually constitutive relationship. Upon birth, individuals interact with one another by learning the meanings and social expectations of their behaviors based on their roles through a variety of symbolic systems including language. Language as a behavioral indicator of thought and beliefs is apparent in the identity conflict between Taiwanese, Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese. On one hand, Taiwanese and Hong Kongers think they are more Chinese due to the traditional Chinese characters they use rather than the simplified Chinese used by the mainlanders. On the other hand, ironically, some Hong Kongers also believe that they are more Western/modern because they speak English. However, with crossing into the U.S., all of them are immediately categorized as “foreign” due to their non-native English speaker identity.

Compared to Mead, Blumer’s (1955) view on symbolic interactionism is more processual. He contended that humans act toward things because of the meanings attached to these things, which are socialized from social interaction. Further, he also believed that meanings are interpreted differentially by the individuals in the encounters. For instance, in the Hong Kong
protest that has been going on for over four months, some protesters poured paint on China’s national emblem, burnt the national flag, and even demonstrated the U.S. American flag and colonial British flag. To these protesters, China’s national emblem and national flag symbolize suppression of freedom and democracy while the U.S. American and British flags mean liberation and freedom. To many mainlanders and some overseas Chinese, however, the U.S. American and British flags only enrage them with a heartbreaking memory of the old semi-colonized China which suffered great humiliation and oppression, whereas China’s national emblem and flag are signs of freedom and a unified sovereign China standing up from miseries of colonial invasion and can no longer be separated. Demonstrating foreign flags and destroying China’s national flag, to them, therefore, are signs of betrayal and mental colonization of Hong Kongers. During such unpleasant encounters, the many identities with which some Chinese identify while other Chinese dis-identify compete among each other, leading not only to political unrest but also identity crisis (Francis & Adams, 2019).

The Relational Nature of Cultural Identity.

Carrillo Rowe (2005) reframes identity (belonging) from “a politics of location” toward “a politics of relation” (p. 15). In other words, she looks at “becoming” rather than “being” as a function of belonging as well as the cultural contexts where individuals’ “agency, experience, and consciousness” are allowed to develop (p. 15). Such belongings are “multiple, shifting, and even contradictory” as well as highly political in nature, where people involved in the power play identify with/against certain ideologies or redefine their own (p. 18). The pro-democracy Taiwanese and Hong Kongers fight for autonomy with perseverance because, for Taiwanese, their older generations had witnessed in the past “white terrorism” (authoritarian tight control) by the KMT, and, for Hong Kongers, the endless political turmoil in the neighboring mainland. As the fruit of victory with painstaking effort, cherishing democracy has thus become an identity of
“becoming” for them. For the mainlanders, on the other hand, their identity of being Chinese has also shifted in the past 70 years from the Chinese-ness in the first 30 years of political and economic unrest to the Chinese-ness during the latest 40 years of prosperity and peace. However, the Chinese from different sides seem to struggle to adjust their perception of one another and still see the other with the old static “being” while turning a blind eye to each other’s new “becoming.”

Carrillo Rowe (2005) also recognizes the constant shift of power relations, in which we need to ask whether we should choose “colonizing mentality or something else” (p. 25). This resonates with Sandoval’s (2000) notion of “differential belonging” which refers to a nuanced belonging featured with its complex fluidity (p. 31). Differential belonging neither clings to nor resists any particular ideology. Rather, it flows through and among conflictual and contradictory ideologies in order to achieve its “self-conscious” agency, mobilization, and resistance to power (p. 58). This perspective resonates well with the concept of transnationalism, as transnationalism also demands flexibility to understand identity and culture through multiple, shifting lenses that break through nation-state boundaries. Equipped with these perspectives, I, born and raised in mainland China and academically trained in the U.S., am able to switch my own positionalities across colonial past and globalizing present, beyond national and regional borders, and among different spaces and locations. By doing so, it enables me to gain the capability of loosening my mental boundaries to reach out to a more complex understanding of Chinese-nesses in a plural, conflictual, and contradictory flow.

**Discursive Intersubjectivity of Cultural Identity.**

Discourses serve as a platform for intersubjective cultural interpretations by people within or without certain cultural groups, thereby making an encounter intra- or intercultural communication (Collier & Thomas, 1988). However, not so commonly shared cultural heritage
and traditions, according to Collier and Thomas (1988), are not necessarily legitimate for identifying an encounter as intercultural communication. Instead, identity revealed in a not so commonly shared discursive text is a more valid indicator for intercultural communication (Collier & Thomas, 1988). The cultural identity of Taiwanese and Hong Konger, for instance, serves as a good illustration of this perspective. Although culturally they are closer with China, they believe they have more freedom and privilege than the average Chinese person from the mainland because they enjoy more favorable business policies with the U.S. and have their own “national” passport that enables them to travel to many more countries with less restrictions. In this regard, their perceived privilege makes them feel that they are part of the West (intra-, thus as the Self) and superior to China (inter-, thus as the Other). Therefore, through media exposure and appeals for Western intervention, they discursively attribute their economic struggles and social issues after the 1997 handover solely to China’s, the Other, exploitation and interference.

Further, as a discursive platform, textbooks within educational systems serve the purpose of shaping who we are. During the Hong Kong protest, it was found that the textbooks of many Hong Kong’s elementary and middle schools are filled with anti-China and anti-CCP content. Anything that is related to the CCP is perceived as brainwashing propaganda and thus excluded, including teaching of the national emblem and national flags. Similarly, in Taiwan, there has been a trend to decentralize China from their history textbooks since the 1990s (Zhou & Wang 2018). In mainland China, like elsewhere, however, many believe that textbooks constitute a discursive ground for individuals to develop the love and loyalty for the motherland where Hong Kong and Taiwan are considered an inseparable part.

When such discursive intersubjectivity from both sides fails, individuals have difficulty in identifying with a mutually recognized cultural identity. Therefore, rather than claiming to be
Chinese like most mainlanders do, the Chinese in Taiwan and Hong Kong rather identify themselves as Taiwanese and Hong Konger.

With the consideration of the aforementioned communicative focus in mind, I will explore identity and culture in my project concerning the understanding of Chinese-nesses from a communication studies perspective, i.e., from dimensions including symbolic interactionism, relational politics, and discursive intersubjectivity.

**Research Questions**

As laden in the title, my purposes for this research are to deepen the understanding of Chinese-ness in a transnational context; discuss reasons why there is a need for a decolonized understanding of Chinese-ness; and highlight ways how such an understanding can be achieved. Thus my three overarching research questions for this project are as follows:

- **RQ1.** What does it mean to live in the U.S. as transnational Chinese?
- **RQ2.** How do transnational Chinese make sense of Chinese-ness(es) in such a context?
- **RQ3.** What is at stake in understanding Chinese-ness in a transnational context that necessitates an alternative theorization of race to dominant/White U.S. race ideology?

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I problematized dominant U.S. race logic by pointing out its limiting capabilities of understanding identity, culture, and power, which leaves space for alternative theorizing of race through theories of transnationalism and thick(er) intersectionalities. In doing so, I made a case via theorizing how transnational Chinese in the U.S. are subjugated through multi-colored Otherization while contradictorily perceived in a uniform and reductionist Chinese-ness. I also complicated the understanding of Chinese-ness(es) from multiple standpoints, times, and locations in order to trouble the hegemonic power over knowledge
production (Bhattacharya, 2016) of the Western grand colonial narrative. Ironically though, the construction of Chinese-ness which is largely based on the binaristic Han/non-Han identity logic somewhat coincides with dominant/White U.S. race ideology. As a Chinese living in the U.S., becoming a minority transnationally helps me develop an awareness of how fluid being Chinese can be in an unstable world of today with borders sometimes wide open while other times tightly shut. I believe U.S. Americans, once crossing national or linguistic borders, may in some way experience very similar identity shocks although in other ways they may swim comfortably downstream.

Understanding racial identity in a globalizing world requires us to gain access to a context situated in an interconnected transnationalizing framework. In this study, I hope to understand better what it means to be transnational Chinese while being located in the U.S. My participants are people from the Greater China Region, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, and mainland China. They self-identify as being related to China and/or Chinese in certain ways, be it through language, ancestry, geography, nationality, culture, or anything else.

This study aims to achieve the following: First, in response to Yep’s (2010) and Shome’s (2010) calls, it attempts to provincialize dominant U.S. race logic and race theorization by undoing “racially marked knowledges” (p. 173). To do so, I blend personal identity, politics, accountability, and courage in my contextualizing of understanding Chinese-ness(es). Second, to put the concept of thick(er) intersectionalities into context, I examined intersectional, contradictory, and inconsistent discourses, and incorporated my lived experiences from a specific location and time into the interplay of individual subjectivity and systemic constraints. Third, the study takes an interdisciplinary approach to unfolding how multiple forces have played into the construction of Chinese-ness(es) at racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, political, economic,
emotional, historical, national, and international levels across different times and spaces. The last, via practicing self-reflexivity, I hope to remain cautious to avoid turning the study into a “racial project” that merely moves from decentralizing dominant/White U.S. race ideology while recentering Chinese racial ideologies which may further normalize current racial constructs under critique (p. 174). To do so, I try to 1) think through and across national borders (Kraidy, 2005; Bardhan & Zhang, 2017); 2) interrogate my purpose of writing, my location of enunciation, whom I am speaking to, and what consequences my writing may result in (Yep, 2010, p. 173).

This study will contribute to critical intercultural communication scholarship by situating knowledge of race, identity, and power in a more specific and complex context both within and without the U.S. through a transnational perspective. Further, with an objective to provincialize dominant U.S. race logic, it makes an effort to transnationalize and internationalize theorizing of race. In addition, speaking in a voice from a non-Western perspective, I practice self-reflexivity throughout my writing in the hope to avoid re-essentializing identity, race, and power in a covert “oppressor-oppressed” Manichean dualism that I intend to deconstruct. I thus hope this study will serve as a decolonial rather than racial project as mentioned earlier.

In order to achieve these research goals, nuanced lived experiences, perspectives from various locations and times by people who identify and dis-identify with Chinese-ness in different ways are of particular significance to my research. This subsequently demands appropriate methodological choice-making, which is decisive for the potential achievement of my study. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology that guides me to conduct this study.
CHAPTER 3
EMPLOYING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND INTERVIEW FOR IDENTITY RESEARCH

With the aim to capture the complexities and situatedness of identity nuances of transnational Chinese, I employ a mixed-method approach to my research with autoethnography and interview (face-to-face interview and written interview). My methodological choice-making is informed by my cultural identity, my researcher identities, as well as spatial relations of power.

Below are my rationales for using these methods as well as the assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses of each method. I also illustrate how a mixed-method approach may remedy weaknesses of each method when employed separately. The last section includes specifics of how I conducted the mixed-method approach in my research.

Rationales for Using Multiple Qualitative Methods

To make a connection between the theoretical framework and methodological framework of my research, I reiterate briefly some concepts that are essentials to transnationalism and thick(er) intersectionalities as well as some key assumptions of qualitative research methods in general (emphasized in italics below).

Transnationalism provides us with a perspective to think beyond the confines of nation-state borders with a recognition of migrant subjectivity in the context of globalization being a fluid site for multiple contrasting narratives to display which cannot be defined with binaristic and essentialist logic (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017, p. 288). Similarly, according to Yep (2016), the thickness of identities could and should be studied through the interrogation of “consistencies, contradictions, and tensions in context-specific ways” (p. 90). Identities should be perceived as
“becoming” (processual) rather than “being” (static) (p. 90). Besides, the messiness of our mundane communication must also be understood through the “emerging, fragmented, contradictory, improvisational, and creative ways” identities are constructed, performed, and negotiated in today’s global world (p. 90). Further, thick(er) intersectionalities is capable of catching the “affective charges and intensities of identity,” including processes of identification, counter-identification, and disidentification (p. 91). Additionally, identities are embodied material experiences within specific geographical and historical locations rather than simply abstract socially constructed categories (p. 92). This requires an understanding of layered interaction between such categories and the ways people make meaning out of, act upon, and contest these categories as they are simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged by them in different ways to different degrees within particular spatial and historical contexts (p. 92).

Both perspectives require an emphasis on particularities and situatedness of identity experiences from an intersectional lens, which are of primary advantage for qualitative research methods. First, interpretivist qualitative researchers believe realities are context-specific while in plural form simultaneously, and social realities are intersubjectively constructed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 8), which demands an interdependence between researchers and their subjects. In addition, qualitative scholars consider social reality as processual and socially constructed. To them, knowledge is partial, thus credible knowledge can only be gained through in-depth interactions with participants, with whom they seek to maintain a close relationship. Moreover, both verbal and narrative means are preferred data collection approaches for qualitative researchers to achieve a “rich and deep” (Bryman, 1999, p. 36) understanding of both the personal and social from and with the participants.

Therefore, in order to take advantage of the strengths of qualitative research methods
while considering their weaknesses, I combine autoethnography and in-depth interviews in my inquiry. In the following, I address how my cultural identity and researcher identity play significant roles in my methodological choice-making. Also, I acknowledge that these identities are interwoven with and inseparable from each other, with each informing and being informed by another. These identity influences, although discussed in separate sections, thus cannot be perceived simply as clear-cut divisions.

**Cultural Identity and Methodology.**

I was brought up in a collectivistic cultural environment with an instinctual sensitivity to the interdependent and relational aspects in life and the possible consequences once such balance is disturbed. As a subject, I know myself as a member of a collective “we,” whether it be a family, community, or nation. I live a life of “ours” rather than simply “mine.” We communicate by reading highly-contextual non-verbal cues most of the time. We praise others with performed humility by lowering our “selves” down rather than directly telling others they are awesome. When the face of the “us” is impaired, the face of “mine” is failed simultaneously and emotional reaction will follow. As an object, I know myself as a “me” through the gaze of the “generalized other” (Mead, 1934/1967). With an implicit play of the “reward and punishment” game (Foucault, 1975/2012), I learn what is appropriate and what is to be avoided. The ascribed “me” plays a far more significant role in my life than the avowed “I.” A life of “me” is seen as virtuously altruistic and praiseworthy while that of “I” as undesirably selfish and arrogant.

Transferring to the U.S. context, where the individualistic “I” is highly normalized and elevated, I notice my “me” is slowly withering while my “I” is gradually blooming. The contentious shifts between my two selves feel both liberating and limiting because while I have gained more self-autonomy and become more out-spoken I have simultaneously felt the loss of “me” as a more engaged and connected member of the “we.”
When it comes to methodological choice-making, on the one hand, I bear in mind both collectivistic and individualistic considerations, especially when the researcher-participant relationship is concerned. As mentioned above, as a qualitative researcher, I hope to develop a safe, close, and honest relationship with my participants, myself included. This rule sets the tone for my choice of autoethnography as one of my primary research methods. First, by taking the researcher’s self as a research site (Chang et al., 2016), autoethnography not only opens a window for me to speak for the “I” but also attends to the need of self-reflexivity which is also deeply embedded in the Confucian practice of 吾日三省吾身 (wurisanxingwushen; three time a day I reflect on myself), which is an internalized gaze of the generalized other from the “I” toward the “me” (Mead, 1934/1967).

On the other hand, I also acknowledge the partiality of our knowledge both as a researcher and human being, which grants the possibility of using face-to-face interview as a data collection method, for it is focused not only on the “hows” but also on the “whats” of people’s lives (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 646). As a way of contemporary storytelling (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998), interview participants actively (co)construct knowledge revolving around the questions and responses in the interview (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Further, with a consideration of participants’ nuanced cultural understanding of interviewing, I also offered written interview as an alternative option for them. To me, written interview as a method of data collection is more inclusive and equally capable of collecting participants’ stories of their lived experiences in a different form. Projecting many of my potential participants would come from acquaintance cultures that demand a warming-up phase between people in order to have meaningful communication, this method was a purposeful choice on my part for those who prefer an alternative interview method.
As such, I use written interview due to my concern with successful recruitment of participants who may not feel comfortable with direct face-to-face interviews, especially when the interviewer is still a stranger to them. My concern is twofold. On one hand, I hold that affinity occurs only when a “we” rather than a “me-you” or “we-they” relationship is cultivated, within which interview partners develop mutual trust in an “honest, sincere, dependable, truthful, reliable, and safe” environment (Stewart & Cash, 2014, pp. 6-7). But such a relationship may not be successfully developed in face-to-face interviews with participants who prefer written forms of interaction to spoken. On the other hand, I wonder if using face-to-face interview as a normalized method may possibly lead to the vanishing of “the alterity of the Other” as “it becomes part of the same,” which, in Levinas’ term, is “ontological imperialism” (Levinas; cited in Sarup, 1996, p. 68) by assuming all participants will likely share the same preference of an interviewing method, e.g., face-to-face interview. In order not to reduce both the researcher and participant to an “ontological subject” only but rather treat them as an “ethical subject” as well, my choice of written interview is also a practice of showing “respect for the Other’s heterogeneity” (Levinas; cited in Sarup, 1996, p. 68) by recognizing participants’ nuanced cultural understanding of interviewing and differed preferences in interacting and conveying information with the interviewer, the stranger. It is with this concern that I proposed written interview as an alternative. In conducting interviews, I used the same questions in both my face-to-face interview and written interview, which enabled the consistency of data collection and data analysis.

Overall, I see the “interview” element in both interviewing methods as an opportunity for an “I-Thou” encounter (Buber, 1937), in which the researcher holds a respectful and learning attitude toward building a “participants-researcher” and “researcher-participant” relationship.
with the participants (Pensoneau-Conway, 2012, p. 39). For written interview participants, as well, without direct face-to-face interaction, enough distance is provided for independently fashioning their responses (Schutz, 1967). In doing so, a safer relationship becomes possible and a willingness toward later involvement in the research may be cultivated as only their willingness to be involved may lead to “a meaningful interchange” (Stewart & Cash, 2014, p. 6).

**Researcher Identity and Methodology.**

As a qualitative researcher in critical intercultural communication, I embrace the “critical/relational/contextual approach” (Levine-Rasky, 2002). Although this tripartite framework was originally proposed as an approach for understanding Whiteness, I find it particularly insightful in its potential for guiding methodological choices. First, it cautions the researcher that their methods may perpetuate social injustice (critical); second, it calls for attention to the “symbolic and material dependence” of the researcher Self on the researched Other (relational); third, it foregrounds “historical construction” and intersectionality of identity in making methodological choices (contextual) (Yep, 2007, p. 90). I thus wonder: 1) whether subjective story-telling could be enjoyed by the participant if a “participants-researcher” and “researcher-participant” relationship is yet to be established (Pensoneau-Conway, 2012, p. 39); 2) whether face-to-face interview is adequately inclusive to all participants; and 3) whether face-to-face interview is capable of capturing the “whats” and “hows” of any participants of any identity; or, in other words, whether an alternative “how” to gain the “whats” and “hows” should be taken into methodological consideration. These questions directed me toward an “avoid-erasure” orientation (Frankenberg & Mani, 1993/1996) for my methodological design and choice-making.

An orientation toward non-erasure comes from Minnich’s (1990) notion of four basic “errors” in knowledge that may be produced by disciplinary norms and ideals (p. 49). They are
“faulty generalization, circular reasoning, mystification, and partial knowledge” (Yep, 2007, p. 90). To be specific, these errors lead to erasures of knowledge of, about, and by the Other since “knowledge generated about the center” is usually standardized as normal human communication (p. 90). As well, the standards justify “traditional disciplinary knowledge,” within which “taken-for-granted ideals” are barely interrogated (p. 90). Thus, difficulties would block the road for shifting old knowledge systems without new ones. Informed by Minnich, I hope to avoid turning either me or my participants into objects in my methodological choices (transnational Chinese as the Other) and keeping our centeredness (transnational Chinese as the Self) under careful examination.

**Spatial Relations of Power and Methodology.**

As an undergraduate course instructor at a U.S. midwestern campus, I often encounter students struggling with speech anxieties when required to make a class presentation. Their anxiety, rather than being accepted as a different nature of being, is seen in the U.S. as a flawed trait that needs to be improved, fixed, or cured. Responsibility thus is diverted to the students with anxiety rather than the external influences, such as a culture that values oratory and public speaking as a necessary human competence. Students with such perceived “flaws” may feel anxious merely by realizing that they are unable to gain the human competence that they should have. I also notice that while many students may have anxieties speaking in public space, they display excellent communication skills in an informal, individual presentation and in their writings, which I perceive as crucial skills no less important than public presentation. Being an instructor to students with public speaking anxieties as well as being someone speaking English as a foreign language sitting with native English speakers, I understand with my first person experience how the invisible but palpable peer pressure and powerful public gaze may impact my performance and my reception by others.
This reflection on public speaking anxiety makes me take into account spatial relations of power (Shome, 2003) when choosing and developing research methods. By spatial relations, Shome means social locations, which may impose social forces of constructed categories such as class, ethnicity, race, and gender, and so forth on the participant no matter how hard the researcher attempts to isolate such forces (see also Seidman, 2006). I would also like to mention that virtual spatial relations, Zoom interviews for example, between the researcher and participant are equally worthy of attention for socially-just methodological choice-making. As Collier et al. (2001) indicate, assuming “a position of objectivity, detachment, and neutrality” without recognizing the political nature of knowledge, our “accountability and responsibility” as a researcher will be removed in our complicity in normalizing hegemonic ideology (p. 92). Paying close attention to power distance (Hofstede, 2011) that is appropriate to the participant is thus crucial to socially-just methodological choice-making.

As discussed above, only by providing alternative teaching and learning methods rather than focusing on students’ anxieties which are actually natural and normal, can a more inclusive teaching environment then be nurtured. Similarly, in order not to erase participants’ cultural identities, I hoped to develop and employ more inclusive research methods for my inquiry with both my own and my participants’ cultures taken into consideration. In response to Yep’s (2007) call for promoting inclusive research in communication and for “naming silenced lives” (LeCompte, 1993, p. 9), I applied the written interview method as an alternative and additional choice to face-to-face interview (actual or virtual) for the participants to share their stories that are not necessarily verbally preferable or appropriate and that are not equally easily spoken by everyone in public or in regular face-to-face interviews with a stranger, the interviewer.
Employment of Mixed Qualitative Methods

In order to capture the nuanced understandings of Chinese-ness(es) as well as the complexities and contradictions for transnational Chinese’s identification (consistency between avowed and ascribed identity), disidentification (avowed identity contradicts ascribed identity), and counteridentification (avowed identity counters ascribed identity) with Chinese-ness (Muñoz, 1999; Yep, 2016), I employed a mixed-method approach for my research by incorporating autoethnography and interview as my research methods. In the following, I discuss the assumptions/considerations, strengths/values, and demerits/weaknesses of each method. I also elaborate how a mixed-method approach could remedy the weaknesses of each method when employed separately. I then discuss how I applied this approach in my research.

Autoethnography.

Autoethnography is popular among qualitative researchers who embrace multiple truths in people’s lived realities and individual subjectivity in constructing such truths. For instance, scholars conducting ethnomethodology believe that ethnographic texts cannot be monological or merely an interpretation of an abstracted reality (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011). Similarly, postmodernists reject epistemological authority and subscribe to the idea of multiple, fragmented selves (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011). Constructivists advocate for intersubjectively constructed realities between the researcher and researched. Moreover, poststructuralists, such as Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard, are engaged with issues relating to “subjectivity, complexity, perspective, and meaning construction” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 5). They reject that history is a linear and necessarily liberating process of self-actualization (Sarup, 1996, p. 67). Instead of a singular, grand narrative of History, they believe in multiple disrupted histories (Foucault, 1969/2013). They emphasize singularity rather than universality and engage with the work that produces knowledge by highly respecting the Other without
erasing them (Sarup, 1996, p. 68). They question a priori and essentialist constructs and aim to deconstruct the contradictory construction between binaristic oppositions (Derrida, 1997). They also believe in individuals’ subjectivity while recognizing the messy and unpredictable specificities and particularities in people’s lived experiences, which are seen as foundations of multiple truths. Further, poststructuralists attend to the political nature of knowledge and text and take personal writing as a talk-back against objective Reality.

In fact, autoethnography is both a method and text that breaks away from biographical conventions by generating its own features such as performed experiences in text, critical self-reflexivity, social justice orientation, resistance to dominant narrative, partiality and incompleteness, and an emphasis on lived experiences, voice, subjectivity, truths, and presence (Denzin, 2014). To Denzin (2014), autoethnography, as a performance text, is meant to produce “evocative experience that is true ‘to experience’ rather than true ‘in experience’” (p. 53) and to move the audience to reflective and critical action rather than personal catharsis. Further, he also stresses the multiple versions and the contextuality of life stories that there is no such thing as a “single, all-encompassing” story or personal experience as an “individual production” (p. 56). Stories, to Denzin, are biased in interpretations. They are “fictions, or, fictional truth” (p. 59) that serve to talk back to and contest what occurred (p. 64). Moreover, Denzin contends that autoethnography is a writing-performance text, which is meant to be reflexive, inconclusive, alive, and open to interpretation, and that it is political, emotional, analytic, interpretive, and pedagogical while also local, partial, incomplete, exhilarating, or painful to read (p. 87).

Therefore, proponents of autoethnography are criticalist in nature. Ontologically, they perceive realities as socially and historically constituted and inevitably shaped by power relations including racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, social, and political values. Epistemologically, they
believe that the researcher-participant relationship is subjective and dialectic with an aim to empower and emancipate. Axiologically, criticalists hope to utilize their value biases embedded in the research to influence the research process and outcomes for social justice goals (Ponterotto, 2005).

To me, the autoethnographic text offers an alternative writing style that is both academic and personable. In both form and structure, autoethnography serves as a resistance to the normative standard of measuring academic work. Its charm lies exactly in its multiplicity of forms of writing, which makes autoethnography, rather than a singular, a collection of diverse approaches to writing and performing life stories. Autoethnography takes the researcher’s self as the research site while transcending the personal by situating one’s self in the larger social context to reach a critical knowledge of society from a personal lens (Chang et al., 2016). It challenges beliefs in objectivity and distance between the research and researched. Through personal stories, the sociocultural contexts are unraveled and the connection between the social and the personal is established. As well, autoethnography enables the researcher, as both researcher and participant, to deepen the examination of their own thinking and realities that are not known to others. Specifically, in my research, autoethnography contributed to capturing the messy nuances (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) of my racialized experiences of navigating the U.S. racial/cultural landscape by performing my Chinese-ness(es) under multi-colored Otherization in mundane communication. Through its ability to address nuanced identity negotiation, autoethnography allows me to speak against the assumed singular One-ness of Chinese identity.

Autoethnography entails many things. As Spry (2011) so beautifully puts it:

Autoethnography is body and verse. It is self and other and one and many. It is ensemble, acapella, and accompaniment. Autoethnography is place and space
and time. It is personal, political, and palpable. It is art and craft. It is jazz and blues. It is messy, bloody, and unruly. It is agency, rendition, and dialogue. It is danger, trouble, and pain. It is critical, reflexive, performative, and often forgiving. It is the string theories of pain and privilege forever woven into fabrics of power/lessness. It is skin/flints of melanin and bodies in the gendered hues of sanctuary and violence. It is a subaltern narratives revealing the understory of hegemonic systems. It is skeptical and restorative. It is an interpreted body of evidence. It is personally accountable. It is wholly none of these, but fragments of each. It is a performance of possibilities. (pp. 15-16)

However, autoethnography is also criticized with many charges, such as being non-analytical, too artful, self-indulgent, less rigorous, and theoretical (Denzin, 2014), as well as lacking in accountability and filled with unquestioned assumptions (Chang et al., 2016).

**Face-to-Face Interview.**

Qualitative researchers are proponents of the constructivist (or interpretivist) paradigm which adheres to multiple equally valid realities that are socially constructed (Schwandt, 1994) rather than seeing reality as an externally singular entity (Hansen, 2004). This belief can be traced back to Kant who holds that human beings know the world from evidence, also through mental capabilities, and that nature cannot exist without the knower’s subjectivity (Hamilton, 1994). Researchers who employ interviewing thus have an interest in and an aim at understanding lived experiences from the points of view of those who live such experiences on a daily basis (Seidman, 2006). Realities of such experiences are constructed by the participants themselves through a meaning-making process, and understanding of these experiences are co-constructed by both the researcher and participants. Ontologically, constructivists believe in multiple, constructed realities instead of a single true Reality. Epistemologically, they embrace a
communicative process that stresses the central role of the researcher-participant interaction in capturing and understanding the lived experience of participants. Axiologically, constructivists acknowledge the impact of their own values and lived experience on the research process (Ponterotto, 2005).

As Seidman (2006) explains, interviewing is a window that opens up participants’ perspectives on what matters to them in their everyday struggles. Interviews are intersubjectively constructed (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) through engaged communication which moves toward negotiated, context-specific understanding (Fontana & Frey, 2000). They are a way of contemporary storytelling (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998) with the respondents being narrators and researchers being participants working together to actively construct a story and its meaning (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Qualitative interviewers emphasize listening to participants’ perspectives as closely as possible, focusing more on specificity and particularity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) also bring up a question rising from the linguistic turn regarding the possibility of collecting knowledge through interviewing. According to them, the interview, itself as a social encounter, becomes the “productive site” of “reality-constructing” (p. 4) and “reportable knowledge” rather than a “neutral conduit” or “source of distortion” (p. 3). Whatever is told is a reflection of the consciousness of the storyteller (Seidman, 2006).

However, potential flaws may also backfire while conducting face-to-face interviews. For instance, researchers should be aware of their possible egocentrism that may damage the interview process and the outcome. As well, interviewing should not be understood as an ideal means to understand another fully (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Like any other research method, interviewing is by no means perfect for any research topic or every participant. On the contrary, conducted inappropriately, the interviewer may face the risk of “turning others into subjects”
who are appropriated for the benefit of the interviewer (p. 13), either economic gains or scholarly advancement. It is extremely hard to achieve equitable research without a thorough consideration of the “for whom, by whom, and to what end” questions in interviews (p. 13).

**Written Interview.**

As discussed earlier, the written interview is a method appropriate for my potential participants who may prefer written rather than spoken interactions. To me, it is both an ethical and methodological choice which takes into consideration participants’ cultural identities and personalities rather than assuming face-to-face interview as universally applicable. Ontologically, epistemologically, and axiologically, this method inherits from both the constructivist and criticalist perspectives. However, it shares elements of the face-to-face interview such as paying attention to participants’ subjectivity, perspective, and voice with a respect for their specific realities and different versions of truths.

Designed to study a diverse population (Jansen, 2010) and analyze multiple biographies (Creswell, 1998), the written interview largely protects the participants’ privacy without posing pressure on the participants who do not prefer face-to-face interactions with the researcher. It allows participants to complete the interview questions on their own at their convenience with in-depth responses and well-thought out narratives flowing out freely. For many of my potential participants who have grown up in non-Western cultures where speaking is not exclusively valued, the written interview may be a much appreciated option to nurture an initial relationship between them and the researcher. As I see each interviewing relationship as “individually crafted,” such consideration may positively contribute to the researcher-participant relationship building process (Seidman, 2006, p. 95). Again, I am highly aware of how our gender, class, education level, ethnicity, race, and political views may play into the regular interviewing process. I recognize how such power relations could potentially inhibit my participants’
willingness to participate and possibly prevent them from engaging in the interview and/or honestly sharing their own stories rather than the researcher’s wanted stories (i.e., courtesy bias) due to shared unconffrontational cultural etiquette.

Bearing such concerns in mind, I provided the written interview option with the goal to develop an “I-Thou” relationship with my participants (Buber, 1937), in which they are not a third person existence but “alive and conscious” Thou (Schutz, 1967, p. 164). With this mutual “Thou-ness,” a “We” relationship can be hopefully nourished. Moreover, as mentioned elsewhere, in an “I-Thou” relationship, the interviewer leaves sufficient space for the participants to “fashion” their responses “as independently as possible” (Seidman, 2006, p. 96). This was exactly my purpose of designing this written interview method. I hoped to strike a balance between saying adequately enough on my side as the researcher and intruding little enough to ensure participants’ autonomy to stay focused on their own lived experiences. By constructing interview questions myself while leaving enough distance, freedom, and space for those who would like to construct their own stories alone in some distance, I thus provided written interview as an alternative option to face-to-face interview.

**How A Mixed-Method Approach Remedies Weaknesses of Each Method When Employed Separately.**

As mentioned earlier, autoethnography has been criticized as too artful, self-indulgent, and less rigorous and theoretical (Denzin, 2014). Further, some scholars are suspicious of autoethnography’s unquestioned assumptions and lack of accountability (Chang et al., 2016). Similarly, a face-to-face interview may be exploitative without careful contemplation of its purpose, possible consequences, and the researcher’s ethics. The written interview may be perceived either as redundant since the face-to-face interview is already a seemingly sufficient method to many or as inadequate due to its lack of non-direct interactions between the researcher
In response to the criticisms of autoethnography both as a methodology and a form of writing, Denzin (2014) argues against the mindset for using social scientific criteria to evaluate qualitative writing. By quoting Bochner, Denzin (2014) contends that there is no single, unchallenged way to decide what is valid, useful, and significant knowledge. Discussions of criteria for performance writing need to take into account its moral, ethical, political, as well as literary and aesthetic values. Supported by multiple scholars’ criteria from different perspectives, Denzin also presents his performative criteria in evaluating autoethnography, which include: to criticize; to challenge taken-for-granted, repressive meanings; and to exhibit interpretive sufficiency, representational adequacy, and authentic adequacy (Denzin, 2014). Regarding its charge of lack of accountability and unquestioned assumptions, I would argue that as a proponent of the poststructuralist perspective myself, autoethnography’s “lack of accountability” to some is exactly what subjectivity means to me; and its “unquestioned assumptions” are where our value biases lie as an “I,” the research subject. Moreover, the face-to-face interview, as a capable way of making meaning in and with language (Seidman, 2006, p. 14), provides invaluable information from other members of the cultural “we” to complement the researcher’s autoethnographic narratives. Similarly, the written interview, as a way of “knowing and understanding” (Schrag, 1997, p. 24), offers alternative narratives, interpretations, and perspectives to my own narratives from other members who are from different locations with different historic views and experiences. Data gained from all three methods, put together, helped unravel the contradictions, contestations, and inconsistencies of our messy lived experiences as transnational Chinese living in the U.S. To me, this is also where critical reflexivity emerges and flourishes and where our assumptions are challenged by the multiple
narrated realities.

As for the face-to-face interview, an ethical issue I am concerned with is its seemingly universal validity among qualitative researchers. According to Holstein and Gubrium (1995), interviewing is a method “inherently collaborative and problematic” (p. vii). To be specific, its inclusiveness may actually become a potential exclusion to members who do not fit into this interviewing culture. I become cautious about how many potential participants may have already been excluded when the “face-to-face” interviewing method is brought up when recruiting, especially for my participants, who may not feel naturally connected to a stranger (the interviewer) during an initial contact. This is how the written interview may serve as an equally important and more inclusive alternative to face-to-face interview for some of my participants. The written interview, in this sense, may largely remedy the weakness of face-to-face interview not only by drawing potential participants with different personalities but also by lowering anxieties that may be heightened in traditional face-to-face interviews when recording devices are used or sensitive topics are brought up. Additionally, as mentioned elsewhere, written interviews allow for more freedom and flexibility for the participants to respond to the questions at their own space and convenience.

The argument above is also a response to the possible critique of the written interview’s redundancy. Other than being redundant, in fact, I rather see it as a more ethical and inclusive choice with participants’ cultural background and personality being taken into consideration. Further, for its “non-direct interaction” characteristic, I would contend that it serves two particular purposes indeed. First, it is a protection for participants’ privacy and self-autonomy/subjectivity. Second, it is a way of increasing their willingness to participate and future involvement. In terms of mutual remedy, the written narratives are likely to be better
thought out and more thorough while spoken narratives from face-to-face interviews are more casual and improvised. Both are legitimate and appropriate methods for different participants in different ways. Further, in comparison, the strengths of autoethnography primarily lie in its self-reflexivity and critical awareness of power relations. Autoethnographers must be aware of the purposes for doing autoethnography for it being capable of contesting research norms; writing from inside; negotiating through difficult emotions; “breaking silence/(re)claiming voice;” and “writing to right” (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 32).

**The “How” of Approaching Mixed Methods**

In the following, I elaborate on the procedures of applying the three methods.

As W. E. B. Du Bois once wrote, “I seem to see a way of elucidating the inner meaning of life and significance of that race problem by explaining it in terms of the one human life that I know best” (cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 7). Autoethnography, to me, is both “a way of elucidating the inner meaning of life” and “a way of being in the world” which requires the researcher to reflect on “how and why we think, act, feel as we do” (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 10). That being said, autoethnography is already part of my lived experiences both as a researcher and human being. Autoethnography is a text, methodology, and reflected lived experiences embedded in my identity. Thus, it is autoethnography, as reflected lived experiences, that informs and shapes this study which, in turn, activates and will continue to activate following autoethnographic narratives while writing and doing this research; it is autoethnography, as methodology, that assists me to reflect on my methodological choice-making; and it is also autoethnography, as text, that situates the personal into the contexts of the social and political.

As a primary component of the methodology for this study, autoethnography flows throughout my writing from the very beginning. I started in the introduction chapter with
narrating my experience as a transnational Chinese doctoral student who lives in the U.S. I discussed how crossing national borders makes me cross multiple identity borders, across which I became racialized according to dominant U.S. race logic through everyday language use, my skin color, my ways of living, and even global politics between China and the U.S. I also became conscious about the nuanced identity politics between transnational “Chinese” from different regions of Greater China Region, who do not necessarily buy the Chinese-ness I identify with due to historic and political reasons. In the transnational context, identity, race, culture, and power are interwoven in transnational individuals’ mundane communication and lived realities. My narratives continue in chapters two and three in which I incorporate conceptual lenses of transnationalism and thick(er) intersectionalities as well as when I discuss my methodological choice-making. In the second half of the second chapter, I elaborated with my own experiences of my racialization in the U.S. through multi-colored Otherness, along with other transnational Chinese, with whom we encounter together the emotional terrains of identifying, dis-identifying, or counter-identifying regarding Chinese-ness(es). In chapter three, again, I discuss how and why my identity as a doctoral student and teacher from a non-Western culture, makes me approach this study with the mixed methods of autoethnography, face-to-face interview, and written interview. Narratives from my own culture, my classroom, and my relationship to others all play a role in carrying on my autoethnographic writing in this study.

The interview method involves sampling, recruiting, data collecting, coding, and analyzing processes. I discuss briefly below how I will carry out the procedures.

**Sampling and Interviewing.**

After gaining approval from the SIU Human Subject Committee, I started recruiting participants from various venues. First, I sought help from the Center for International Education (CIE) to send campus emails to Chinese international students, including those from mainland
China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. (Interestingly, I later noticed the SIU CIE categorized mainland Chinese students, students from Taiwan, and students from Hong Kong in different groups. This way, my email requests were actually only received by mainland Chinese student listserv users. Therefore, I later turned my focus more toward WeChat and my personal network for participant recruitment.) I also shared recruitment information on my WeChat friends circles as WeChat is among the most popular software apps used daily among Chinese both at home and abroad. Another way of recruiting was through my previous network in the U.S. Building upon initial responses via WeChat and emails, I then applied the snowball method with these initial participants. Eventually, I recruited 22 participants by the end of April 2020, who identify as Chinese either in ancestry, language, culture, geography, tradition, family ties, et cetera.

For each interview, I briefly introduced my research project, its purpose, potential risk, data restoration method, and gratuity to be offered. I also informed each participant on their options: face-to-face interview or written interview with a self-chosen pseudonym. Due to the COVID-19 situation, previously planned face-to-face interviews were mostly scheduled on Zoom. I conducted three face-to-face interviews on my university’s campus with three mainland Chinese graduate students prior to the move of classes online rule due to the pandemic. I also received written interview responses from one participant. But the rest of 18 participants were all interviewed on Zoom, with a couple of them preferring video form while most of them chose audio interviews due to privacy concerns. Before the actual interview, they either verbally or electronically granted consent for their participation and my recording. I followed my interview protocol for all the interviews. However, as I gained more experience with each interview, I also used probing questions flexibly to build rapport and suit our conversation. Most interviews lasted one hour or so on average, with a couple longer due to participants’ willingness to share more.
Additionally, all 22 interviewees are bilingual or multilingual, 16 participants spoke English only in the interview, five spoke Chinese only, and one interviewee switched swiftly between English and Chinese.

The 22 participants are from different locations of the Greater China Region who are currently living/studying/working in the U.S. They all came to the U.S. for different reasons during different periods of time. Most of them, though, came to study and stayed on after graduation. Among them, 20 are from mainland China, one from Hong Kong, and one from Taiwan. The background information including their legal status in the U.S., ethnicity, and geographic region can be located below (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

![Interviewee Demographic Information](image)

**Figure 1 Interviewee Demographic Information**

**Interview Questions.**

Q1. How do you make sense of your racial identity in the U.S.?

Q2. What do China and the U.S. mean to you respectively?

Q3. How do you identify yourself in China and in the U.S.?

Q4. How do you position yourself in relation to the U.S. before and after you came to the U.S.?
Q5. How do you position yourself in relation to China before and after you came to the U.S.?

Q6. What makes you (not) identify as Chinese?

Q7. What do(es) China and/or Chinese-ness mean to you after having transnational experiences?

Q8. How do you think about China’s renationalization of Hong Kong and/or unification with Taiwan?

Q9. How much is your life affected by the Sino-U.S. trade war?

Q10. How do you think about the trade war?

Q11. What have you seen that has remained/changed in/about China?

Q12. How do you envision your future with the U.S. and China?
Table 1 Additional Information about the Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years in U.S.</th>
<th>Legal Status</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
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<td>undergraduate</td>
<td>Han</td>
<td>1+</td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wan</td>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>Han</td>
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<td>U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liu Jian</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Han</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Ph. D candidate</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>Hunan</td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bing</td>
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<td>Medical scientist</td>
<td>Han</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>US citizen</td>
<td>Xinjiang</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shengha</td>
<td>CS</td>
<td>IT engineer</td>
<td>Han</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>H1B</td>
<td>Jiangsu</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivian</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>HIV prevention</td>
<td>Li</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>H1B</td>
<td>Guangdong</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Business consult</td>
<td>Han</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>H1B</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Social Activism</td>
<td>Ph. D student</td>
<td>Han</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>Anhui</td>
<td>Gap year; China</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Coding and Analysis.**

After all interviews were completed in early May 2020, during the Trump administration, I manually transcribed all the 22 interviews into a data set reaching 161 single-spaced pages in length. I then conducted a three-stage coding process (see Figure 2): open coding, first cycle
coding, and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2016). I collected data to a spread sheet in the original interviewing language in the open coding stage. Then in the first and second cycles of coding, I translated all codes into English.

![Figure 2 Procedure for Data Coding](image)

To be specific, in the open coding, or pre-coding, stage, I organized the selected data from the interview transcriptions into an Excel spread sheet and grouped the selected data according to each interview question (IQ) (see below for interview questions), which were then further grouped under each research question (RQ). Therefore, each RQ comes with multiple IQs which may provide answers to the given research question. For example, Group #1 (RQ1) includes IQs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 12; Group #2 (RQ2) include IQs 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11; and Group #3 (RQ3) includes IQs 2, 3, 4, 5. It is clear that IQs 2, 3, 4, 5 appear in both Group #1 & #2 (see Table 2), which makes the exact point for RQ3, which seeks to figure out why a complex understanding of Chinese-ness necessitates an alternative theorization of race to dominant/White U.S. race ideology. I see the coding process as both a stage of data analysis and that of co-constructing knowledge between the participants and myself. That being said, in the initial/open
stage of data analysis, I pinpointed appropriate passages from the interview transcripts to prepare a reasonable pool of operational data for the first cycle coding.

Table 2 Research Questions and Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1 What does it mean to live in the U.S. as transnational Chinese?</td>
<td>IQ-1,2,3,4,5,9,10,12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2 How do transnational Chinese make sense of Chinese-ness(es) in such a context?</td>
<td>IQ-2,3,4,5,6,7,8,11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3 What is at stake in understanding Chinese-ness in a transnational context that necessitates an alternative theorization of race to dominant/White U.S. race ideology?</td>
<td>IQ-2,3,4,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Advised by Saldaña (2016), coding methods are to serve the purpose of generating operational themes for the researcher, not vice versa. The researcher should be flexible enough and willing to “mix and match” coding methods as needed (p. 109). Thus, in the first cycle coding, I applied both process coding and in vivo coding techniques with an awareness of their heuristic potential in developing more succinct codes for the later stage. On the one hand, process coding is capable of detecting changes of action with the change of time. Process coding uses gerunds to “label actual or conceptual actions” and “suggest a brief narrative trajectory of action for analysis” by the participant (p. 78). I see it as an appropriate fit for coding identity related data as my research indicates. On the other hand, known as “literal coding” or “indigenous coding” (p. 105), in vivo coding quotes from the actual language of interviewees to reflect their particular experiences/attitudes/values/beliefs in their own terms. This is a phase of intersubjective meaning making featured by “prioritizing and honoring participants’ voice” (p. 106) in its “organic” form (p. 109). I applied in vivo coding in order to easily locate participants’ narratives for the later write-up stage.

Moreover, simply given the sheer number of participants (22 in total) and the volume of data (161 single-spaced pages), it was necessary to conduct a second cycle coding to reorganize
and reanalyze data from first cycle codes. The second cycle coding is a phase of integrating between the local and abstraction (i.e., between participants’ own voice and the researcher’s interpretation), which may either support or contest extant theories with participants’ own interpretations of realities. Also, “abstractions from ‘local’ interpretations” may potentially best reveal cultural identity (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p. 105; Geertz, 1983). In the second cycle coding, I applied pattern coding technique. I did so for two reasons. First, pattern coding is capable of reconciling unity with multiplicity. Further, it helped narrow down previously summarized ideas into more explanatory and inferential concepts, themes, and categories for further analysis (Saldaña, 2016, p. 236). This more “select list of broader” codes (see Table 3) then contributed directly to structuring the following chapter of findings and write-up of the research as well (p. 234).

Table 3 Themes/Categories from 2nd Cycle Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post - 2nd Cycle Themes/Categories</th>
<th>RQ1</th>
<th>RQ2</th>
<th>RQ3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becoming Asian/Foreign/Racialized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US-Centric Body Politics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing at Crossroads</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpredictable/Uncertain Future</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying/Defining Chinese-ness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Thickness of Chinese-ness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnationalized on Renationalization &amp; Disunified on Reunification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Unchanged/Changing China?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrooted Belonging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Faceted Otherness/Possibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American Dream?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messed-up Identities/Chinese-ness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next chapter will focus on the findings based on the interview data transcribed from the 22 interviewees’ narratives. As Table 3 shows, these findings are categorized into three
groups to address the three research questions of this project. Each group comes with four themes aiming to better understand transnational Chinese’ lived identity experiences in the U.S.
CHAPTER 4
DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Split into two sections, this chapter addresses the three research questions of this dissertation project based on the data collected from the 22 interview participants. The first section attempts to understand what it is like to be transnational Chinese living in the U.S. and what Chinese-ness means to the respondents. The second section seeks to unravel the incompatibilities and/or limitations of dominant U.S. race logic, as well as the unified discourse of Chinese-ness in China, in understanding Chinese-ness(es) in the transnational context. This opens up space for an alternative and more globally expansive theorizing of identity and race inspired by the concepts of transnationalism (Kraidy, 2005) and thick(er) intersectionalities (Yep, 2016).

Section 1: Transnational Chinese in the U.S.

RQ1: What Does It Mean to Live in the U.S. as Transnational Chinese?

In crossing national borders to live in the U.S., most, if not all, of my participants have experienced an involuntary identity shift from being a cultural insider, who has little to zero awareness of their identity as a majority member in China, into being an outsider, foreigner, and minority member culturally, nationally, linguistically, and racially, whose self-identification/avowed identity is shadowed by other-identification/ascribed identity. This shift has put them in a vulnerable position in which they become targets of political suspicion, racial discrimination, visa policy restrictions, and even exotic fetishism. Identity politics has begun to play a significant role in their lives. They have to learn to live with their new identity and become “Asian,” foreign, and a racial Other, whose everyday life is entangled into U.S.-centric body politics. During the U.S.-China trade tensions and the recent pandemic, this transnational
identity has further squeezed them into a crack.

**Becoming Asian/Foreign/Racialized.**

My transnational Chinese respondents started to realize their foreignness and racialized identity immediately after they arrived in the U.S. The new identities ascribed to them were not of their choosing. Wenxi Laing was “confused by the American racial concept” and had to “Google to find the correct answer” when filling forms inquiring about her race. Similarly, to Sophia, now working in the Bay Area as a manager in an IT company, her awareness of her own racial difference is from being designated as a person of color and being constantly asked where she is from. “Isn’t White a color?” Sophia was very puzzled. Lately, she got very scared during the pandemic as there has been violence targeting Asians in Silicon Valley. In addition, Vivian finds her Asian identity both fits into and denies many stereotypes. For instance, she does do statistics and is good at math. But she rejects the idea that Asians are less engaging as, to her, this perception is mainly due to language barriers and cultural differences.

Depending on the primary context they live and work in as well as the people they communicate with, such new identities are ascribed largely based on the respondents’ linguistic, physical, political, and material differences. For instance, Xiaoyue, who is of Korean ethnicity and came to the U.S. during her high school years, claims that her ethnic identity is something only on her ID card in China, but somehow this has become a racial concept in the U.S. Being seen as Asian instead of Chinese and praised for her fluent English, she realizes she has become a minority here. Some transnational Chinese became aware of their racial identity due to their physical difference. For example, USC, a professor born and raised in Hong Kong and now working at a mid-west U.S. university, racially identifies herself as Chinese American and Asian. She speaks Cantonese, her mother tongue, at home and cherishes traditional Chinese values. She also realizes that she is racially different due to her appearance and skin color. Moreover, Sarah
recognizes the implications of being transnational Chinese in the U.S., including being seen as being from a totalitarian country, and said that she encounters social barriers. Trying too hard to mingle with U.S. American friends, she eventually “gave up on locals” due to lack of common topics and shared hobbies and experiences. This holds true for Xin as well, who graduated and is now living in her hometown, Beijing. Xin’s memory of her life in the U.S. is more about loneliness and communication barriers rather than an ascribed Asian identity. Being a minority, to her, is more about lack of emotional support than being seen as a person of color. To Xin, “people of color” is only a concept in books. Compared to this concept, she cared more about whether she could make friends easily with locals.

Although not everyone agrees that such identities pose disadvantages in their lives, their awareness of such new identities is very tangible. For example Charlie, an engineer working at a Japanese-owned IT company, does not feel identity to be an issue. To Charlie, stereotyping is alright as sometimes it can be a compliment. He shared with me that he was once shouted at by a homeless man in the street, but he did not care that much nor did he take it as racism. He does not think there is a glass ceiling or racial discrimination working against him or Asians in general because both his wife’s and his bosses are Asian. Lexie, as well, is excited that she has become a global citizen after coming to the U.S. Different from her Han Chinese experience in China, she is now enjoying being a multi-lingual Asian woman who has a bigger window to the world. Shenghan, too, has no issue about his changing identity. What he is more aware of is the social contexts both at school and the workplace, where he needs to pay extra attention to word choices due to a diverse population. Similarly, becoming Chinese American with two U.S.-born children, Bing appreciates the diversity she experiences at work and in her life. She is proud of heritages on both sides. As a natural scientist, she said, “I’m not sensitive to my racial identity at all”
although she does realize her daughter has been made fun of by her peers based on Asian physical stereotypes. “They said to her, ‘you’re Asian, you’re Chinese, your eyes should look like this!’ while squeezing their eyes with their fingers. But my daughter has big eyes. So she said, ‘Look! Is that even close?’ She denied the stereotypes but she was not offended at all.” Bing stressed.

The self-awareness of transnational Chinese can also be related to their legal status and their current career in the U.S., which, to a certain extent, may signify how much security they enjoy. For instance, as a U.S. citizen, Zen firmly identifies as American. However, she embraces her gender identity first. Looking back to her student career, however, she could recall that she had received contradictory treatment from different people, such as being welcomed by U.S. American men as a beautiful woman while being treated with little patience by some school staff as a “foreign-speaking” person. To students, however, identity experiences can mean something very different. For example, Bambi, a doctoral student from Henan Province, the heartland of the ancient Middle Kingdom, who has been studying in the U.S. for over three years, emphasizes that she is an authentic Chinese. However, after coming to the U.S. she is identified by others as Asian, a very broad category which always puzzles her because she has been mistaken for being Korean, Japanese, and Taiwanese. Her identity is no longer a taken-for-granted matter, and she is now a minority. Another doctoral student, Yang, realizes that he has suddenly become Asian and has no membership here. The cultural distance is a matter of disadvantage for him. He has also begun to care about his downgraded economic status and has to pay close attention to the currency exchange rate between the U.S. dollars and Chinese Yuan. Xuehua, who is also a doctoral student but currently stuck in China, has complex feelings about being “Asian” in the U.S. Being the only Chinese and Asian in her department, she feels she is different from the
locals, those who are white, black, and the permanent residents, although she does have a small Chinese support community on campus.

Some transnational Chinese tend to identify with more nuanced identities rather than a singular, unified Chinese identity after coming to the U.S. For example, Claire identifies as Asian and Taiwanese American. But she also perceives her Asian and American identities as her officially ascribed identities and her Taiwanese American and Taiwanese Chinese identities as her chosen and avowed identities. Interestingly, as well, Marcus has a sophisticated interpretation of his identity in the U.S. According to him, American Asians or American born Chinese (ABCs) are more Asian than non-resident East Asians in the U.S. context. But they are not American enough. Marcus has also noticed the power relations between different Asians; for example, ABCs are White in accent and more American while Asians are not. Although he identifies as Asian, he also recognizes such nuances between Asians. Wan also identifies with an entire range of identities such as an independent individual (employment), his name (Wan), his career (profession), his cultural identity (Chinese), and nationality (U.S. American). Liu Jian, who immigrated to the U.S. after high school through chain migration, accepts himself as being Asian and Chinese as well as U.S. American. He confirms that he is quite happy because his ethnic identity matches well with his racial identity. Similarly, Alex has begun to use many labels to describe his identities (such as Chinese national, Chinese, Asian, Chinese diaspora), which did not exist in China but emerged for him here in the U.S. Living in Massachusetts, which is both a blue state and very diverse, Alex does not personally experience any racism. However, he does realize that he is racialized with different labels and his “own self-identification does not matter.” For instance, he is perceived as a foreigner and an expert in tea which, to him, is a cultural stereotype.
U.S.-Centric Body Politics.

Power can be “marked, regulated, and negotiated on and through the body” (Sorrells, 2016, p. 53). This is also how transnational Chinese bodies experience power hierarchies in the U.S. context, where race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation, ability, and national origin can mean very differently from those in other cultural contexts including China. Measured by U.S. standards, they all share a downgraded racial identity shift at different levels in their lives personally, professionally, or politically, although they do have positive experiences in some other aspects of their lives.

From a personal perspective, transnational Chinese have to adapt to the new linguistic, work, and social contexts, in which English is their second and/or foreign language but helps them gain in-group membership and demonstrate capability. For example, tired of being asked where she is from, Sophia gradually begins to refuse to answer the question which, to her, tends to “essentialize [her] identity” in a way that “who you are becomes something against you.” In her opinion, even the concept of minority is such “an exotic idea” because she is quite puzzled by the way someone is defined as a minority: “By population size or being in a sub-culture group?” Lately during the pandemic, she has been concerned about her security and even joined an SOS group on WeChat. “Humans are more dangerous than the virus,” she added. Bambi, as well, in addition to having less chance to speak Chinese in the U.S., has encountered unexpected intragroup racism directed at her by an Asian sales lady in a fashion shop, which broke her heart.

Linguistically, as an active activist back in China and political refugee in the U.S., Wan has experienced disadvantages as a Chinese American, such as linguistic barriers that lead to very few job opportunities and being suspected of being a “communist spy.” However, he recognizes discrimination as a natural part of existence. He usually takes prejudices as an opportunity for constructive cultural exchange and avoids possible confrontations for the sake of
maintaining peace. Similarly, Sarah is concerned about the trade war and afraid of being targeted. So, she prefers to stay focused on academic work. Such non-confrontational communication styles can be a big disadvantage to Asians in the U.S., which Skywalker is very aware of. He recognizes this as a big reason for racism toward Asians. He thus advocates that Asians should speak up for themselves when being treated unfairly. At the same time, he is quite proud that his big masculine male body works as an advantage for him when it comes to dealing with racism. The shifted cultural context may place transnational Chinese in situations where they are perceived as inadequate individuals. For example, Zoey finds that due to her international student identity in the U.S., her local friends tend to treat her as a person who needs help. She feels insurmountable cultural differences here and there due to unshared experiences with her U.S. American friends. There is a distance between them and herself and she cannot blend in. She feels she is irrelevant to the U.S. Similarly, in the work environment, linguistic barriers and personality can play a negative role in transnational Chinese’ job satisfaction and prospects for promotion. For example, Shenghan, although he has developed a shared awareness on social issues such as LGBTQ rights and women’s rights in China, feels the language barrier and lack of common experiences in everyday life prohibit him from expanding his friends circles. Bing also claims that although she is not sensitive to her racial identity as a natural scientist, she definitely acknowledges difficulties Asians face in their career development, especially the language barrier and modest personality orientation that prevent them from vocally promoting themselves. Gender stereotypes regarding Asian women are very visible in the U.S. as well. Wenxi finds her avowed identity transforming from Yellow Pride (through her own lens) to an ascribed “Yellow Peril” (as perceived by others). Her identity is also changed from an ethnic and geographic concept to a racial one. “I have to learn to be an Asian woman by not being one,”
she said explaining she wants to show her independence and strength to resist the stereotype of Asian women in the U.S.

Professionally, such identity politics play out in various ways as well. For instance, as a doctoral student, Xuehua feels strongly about the linguistic challenges she faces. She could not read fast enough and write well enough as her native English peers. Her credibility is always questioned by students. In addition, trying to be polite in the classroom by waiting to be the last one to speak results in having no chance to speak. The different ways of thinking and living make it harder to develop deep relationships with her peers. However, although feeling distanced, she also appreciates the free discussions, different perspectives, and more information gained in U.S. academia, which, to her, is a form of empowerment. Interestingly enough, for Liu Jian, although being an Asian minority is not necessarily always a positive identification, he was offended once by not being recognized as minority when he was applying for a scholarship open to minority students. At the same time, he finds that his varied accent and grammar mistakes are disciplined by his professors and supervisors. In order to advocate for more Asian publicity and representation, Liu Jian is actively engaged with Asian American community affairs. Similarly, as a racial minority in higher education, Wenxi feels she is often left out from receiving information and resources as she is not seen as part of the group. As an associate professor, Claire is also troubled by her Asian identity as this, to her, means an isolated lifestyle, foreign accent, racial discrimination, and a minority teacher with very negative student evaluations. She has been learning to be a U.S. American although she does not want to be too “White.” She states that she will never become a mainstream U.S. American as she is always perceived as Asian American, Chinese American, or Taiwanese American, but never just American. Vivian, as well, is perceived with Asian stereotypes and challenged for her linguistic capabilities. For
instance, she was advised to go to the writing center and was even confronted by a U.S. American student who invalidated her accent with, “You don’t speak English, right?”

At the macro, or political level, the more recent political rhetoric and news media coverage also create a hostile climate that targets persons of Chinese origin, including transnational Chinese. For instance, as a full professor who engages in frequent academic exchange with Chinese universities, USC notices the increasing suspicion of academics of Chinese heritage and has become cautious about her visits to China. Slightly differently, although finding that politics and religion can be sensitive topics in U.S. American people’s lives, Lexie has found for the first time in her life that religion can play a big role in social issues such as debates over pro-life or otherwise, political alliance, and so forth. Lexie also complains that she sometimes has to explain to U.S. Americans that not all Chinese are communists, and that communists are just normal people. She explains to them that just like democrats or republicans in the U.S., communists in China can be as common as one’s family members and classmates, and that joining the communist party during college, although autonomous, is very common in China and is considered a sign of one’s excellence both in academic work and ethics.

As a major in international relations, Marcus is very aware that U.S. Americans’ fear of “commies” results from “Yellow Peril” racism and Cold War era ideologies. He is deeply disappointed at the deep misconceptions U.S. Americans have about China. For instance, he said, “China is no longer a realistically communist country but many Americans create such a China that they want to believe through imagination.” To Vivian, the trade tensions and worsened relationship between the U.S. and China impact her personal life in terms of the limited job opportunities available to international students. She considers Covid-19 causing more harm through racist rumors, chaos, and violence against Asian looking individuals. Wenxi, during the
pandemic, realized she had become the representative of the virus. She said people keep asking her how her family is doing at home although it is the U.S. that is deeply stuck in the pandemic now. Although not personally targeted during the pandemic, Xiaoyue feels anxious and tries intentionally not to show her Chinese identity as she hears stories about discrimination against Asians. She is upset, like many mainland Chinese in the U.S., realizing how politics can impact one’s personal life to this level. Politically, she is very troubled by the U.S.’ interference in Hong Kong and Xinjiang issues through issuing laws on a sovereign state’s internal affairs. She is scared by the widely spread “flawed sources about Covid-19 online” that may add to the already heightened animosity toward Chinese. Regarding U.S.’ political power and media dominance on the world stage, Bambi believes the U.S. has politicized the economy against China and abused the media to demonize China on media platforms by portraying China as an unfair competitor, and that this is done in order to arouse domestic nationalism with a purpose to defeat China’s leadership in the era of technology in the future. As a Chinese, she feels anxious about the worsening Sino-U.S. relations and the unstable visa policies.

**Standing at Crossroads.**

Transnational Chinese in the U.S. enjoy at least two sets of cultural references, value systems, and philosophies they have learned in both cultural contexts. Their wellbeing and understandings of their cultural identities are thus largely impacted by the ways in which these two nations engage each other. Taking sides, to most of them, is as painful as splitting their whole person into pieces. For instance, USC now realizes the interdependence between the personal and the political. U.S. antagonism against China via trade war, political rhetoric, and official government documents targeting China as the enemy due to rivalry in geopolitics make her very concerned as an academic. Also, believing that the coming competition between the U.S. and China will only get worse and more brutal, Skywalker does not want to take sides. “If
World War III happens,” he said, “my side will depend on who initiates the war.” Having deep connections to both the U.S. and China, Sophia feels uncertain about the future and hesitant in making a decision on whether to stay or leave for good. Similarly, Wenxi has a very complicated feeling about both the U.S. and China. Although China is always the primary home, it is where she cannot return due to the very blatant gender discrimination she experiences there. However, although she has received a tenure track position offer now, she still does not feel the U.S. is home because the animosity against China and the Chinese is soaring. Bing used to enjoy a life in which she could move across both countries, but now she feels she has to choose a side. Having two kids and her family here in the U.S., she has to take the U.S. as the home where she feels she belongs and consider China as a place of her past that she visits more as a tourist now, a place where the foods she misses are. She feels she may also have to limit her contact with China in the future. Alex sees strong nationalism on both sides and perceives this to be a political strategy by the leaders who perform tough to assure their own people and appease domestic unrest. However, this adds to his identity struggle in that he, as Chinese, is now afraid of being perceived as related to the CCP. Alex said, “They [U.S. Americans] simply think China is communist, but no Chinese think China is communist.” Alex wishes he could stay in the U.S. while being able to visit China. As a member of the Chinese diaspora, “Just like Israel to Jews,” he does not see a need to go back to China. Now already back in China and approved for a one-year leave from school, Sarah was struggling a few months ago in deciding whether to stay in the U.S. for the summer or go home. She was afraid of not being able to come back after returning to China due to the rarity of flight tickets and extremely risky travel conditions during the pandemic.

This transnational stance also enables transnational Chinese to be critical of both cultures.
As a Marxist, Marcus is concerned about the lives of the farmers in the U.S. and working class laborers in China. He believes they are in very vulnerable positions being involuntarily involved in the “two capitalist imperialists’ power play.” This “fight for command over the third world,” according to Marcus, can be “long lasting and brutal” and may result in “a two-polar world via a new cold war.” Similarly, Xiaoyue does not favor the U.S.’ regime-change campaigns across the world, nor does she prefer China’s rising power. She perceives a more powerful China as dangerous due to it being a one-party system. She also warns about China’s expansion in Africa that can be perceived as neo-colonialism considering the racism targeting Africans in Guangzhou, China. Because of such concerns, Xiaoyue is very afraid of the unprecedentedly falling relationship between the two nations, which may lead to an eventual hot war. She thus wants to seek a third nationality so that she can remain critical from a distance toward both sides.

However, Xiaoyue is also aware that the possibility of this third nation citizenship cannot be guaranteed and depends upon the visa policies of that nation. Lexie also feels very strongly about U.S. cultural imperialism. To her, this is a very smart way to export one’s culture. Thus, she is angry about China’s failure in cultural export and its great firewall which, though it prohibits many hateful, demonizing messages from the West, also prevents its own voice from being heard and understood. Claiming that he stays away from politics, Wan knows that he cannot really stay away from politics as a political refugee. He feels rejected by China for being a social activist and is suspected of being a Chinese spy in the U.S. He recognizes that there is a fear in the U.S. of losing hegemonic power in global economic and geopolitical competition. He also wishes China may recognize its core interests by not competing with the U.S. With a very unique standpoint as a Taiwanese American, Claire perceives Taiwan as a chess piece being played by both the U.S. and China. She is not happy about Taiwan’s situation as she does not want Taiwan
to get involved. However, she praises Donald Trump for being smart in fighting China. She believes Trump’s fight against China has actually helped Taiwan to move businesses back to Taiwan from mainland China. Further, as an Asian studies specialist who is pro-U.S. and proud of Taiwan’s democracy, Claire is concerned about going to China, whose authoritarianism she has little trust in, for her research.

Holding positive light in his own agencies, Liu Jian sees cultural exchange as a favorable solution to differences. He claims that nations should cooperate and work for human good rather than falling into the trap of “might makes right” types of beliefs. He also perceives his in-between identity (e.g., bi-lingual capability) as a resource, which enables him to have more opportunities to move across the world for cultural exchange. USC, as well, sees herself as a cultural and academic bridge for both countries. She believes both countries can learn so much from each other and hopes for positive development between the two nations as benevolent powers.

Unpredictable/Uncertain Future.

Again, the personal is political, and vice versa. This truth has never been more true to the transnational Chinese who are stuck in between during the international tensions between the U.S. and China. Across different walks, professions, as well as legal status, they all share a sense of uncertainty about the future. For instance, as a doctoral student about to graduate, Bambi has gradually developed a shifting attitude toward the U.S. and feels uncertain about her future plans. Xuehua is worried about the future uncertainty of her job prospects. Going back to China with her family earlier this year, she was not able to physically come back to campus and maintain her teaching assistantship in the U.S. due to closure of U.S. consulates and visa restrictions for Chinese students and scholars. She holds very little hope of getting a job in the U.S. as she is not even able to return to the U.S. to complete her degree. However, working in China poses another
challenge due to its different education system. Thinking about how to develop a new network and academic community and remold teaching and scholarship to fit an entirely new academic environment in China is very shocking and even scary to Xuehua. Likewise, Sarah feels helpless about the future due to the falling relationship between the U.S. and China. She loves the U.S. educational resources and hopes to be able to live in both places. However, this now seems like an unrealistic daydream. Another concern of Sarah is making a decision about where to work after graduation. Although she feels more secure in the U.S., the conditions here might be too comfortable for her age as a young woman in her mid-twenties. Also, although she knows she may achieve more self-actualization in China, to be an activist trained in the West striving for public good may cause lots of suspicion, questioning, and interrogation from the government there. Carrying out U.S. American style activism may be deemed as being an underlying agenda for regime change. Similarly, while believing that the trade tensions have limited impact on U.S. American opinions about China as his interpersonal network mainly consists of highly educated intellectuals, Yang is uncertain about his future plans. Although having complex feelings about the U.S., he also has a deep connection to China. Thus, he would rather let God decide his fate after graduation in the near future. Also, for Marcus, he is less concerned about himself than the extreme nationalism in both nations. Although he does not think globalization will disappear, he believes it will be greatly challenged by populism and nationalism as neoliberal globalization benefits transnational corporations and capitalists the most.

Working on H1B visas at the present, many transnational Chinese are struggling in deciding on what to do and where to go. For instance, Sophia has become uncertain about the future. She said she has to be more realistic and short-term oriented. Rather than planning for an ambitious career development in the U.S., she now leans toward adding more experiences on her
resume and saving more money for any possible changes in the near future. Working in the IT field, some of Shenghan’s friends were laid off from Huawei due to its office closure ordered by the Trump administration. Shenghan has a pessimistic vision for the U.S.-China relationship. Holding an H1B work visa, he has no idea what will happen to him after its expiration. However, he does not want to return to China due to its governance style and the firewall that prevents him from accessing useful information and his favorite U.S. computer games. Similarly, Vivian is facing a pending situation for the future. The current political tensions lead to difficult situations for these immigrants’ adaptation. She is stuck in between. While she wants to return to China to take care of her parents, she is concerned that her bi-sexual orientation may not be well received by her parents and Chinese society. “If I were in a relationship with a woman, things could become even more tricky,” said Vivian. Alex, as well, had his visa approval delayed last year and is worried about the worsening Sino-U.S. relations as it may further affect his H1B renewal, visa applications, and immigration status. He has started plans to move to another country. Even for green card holder Wenxi, conditions are tough. Due to the dilemma of choosing between racism in the U.S. and gender discrimination in China, she keeps looking for other options for a possible future relocation to other English-speaking Asian countries.

For some, the tension and struggle are simply from being unprepared for the entirely new transnational cultural context that allows for fewer opportunities due to language barriers and job expectations. For example, Wan, already naturalized as a U.S. American citizen, feels lost in the U.S. as an “unwanted person” who cannot actualize his value here. Further, although he wants to go back to China where he has helped establish many activist organizations, he is much bothered by the foreseeable problems regarding his own safety and freedom to engage in radical social activism in that conservative country. However, he is aware that he could receive very little
social support here in the U.S. as well because the understandings of activism here are very different from those in China. To Wan, the Sino-U.S. relation pictures a pessimistic future for the world in which China is dominated by nationalist voices while Trump destroys the fundamental principles of the U.S. founding fathers.

Therefore, living in the U.S. as transnational Chinese, to most interviewees, means a set of newly ascribed identities that mark them as foreign and racial Other. Attached to their linguistic capabilities, physical features, value systems, and political beliefs practiced in their home country, the measure of their new identities is centered on U.S. body politics within the dominant U.S. race logic. Such racialization, complicated by the geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and China, further pushes transnational Chinese into a position, where they do not want to but oftentimes have to pick a side to claim allegiance to. However, such allegiance, like their self-identification, does not mean much in the face of racial violence and changing immigration policies experienced in their everyday lives. Most of my interviewees, whether they are U.S. citizens or not, seem to have a pessimistic outlook on both the U.S.-China relations and their future in both countries.

**RQ2: How Do Transnational Chinese Make Sense of Chinese-ness(es) in Such A Context?**

With regards to Chinese-ness(es), i.e., what Chinese identity entails, the participants provided a wide range of interpretations based on their understanding of China and being Chinese. These interpretations include language, history, culture, birth place, geographic location, country, label, higher power distance, hierarchy, tight control of speech, and difficult mobility for marginalized populations. There are visible overlaps between the two concepts of China and Chinese in their understandings of Chinese-ness. Many participants seemed to understand them in an interchangeable way. This is probably an exemplification of how
complex, fluid, and messy identities stretched across the global ethnoscape can be. In terms of their perspectives of Hong Kong’s renationalization and Taiwan’s reunification, their answers were also varying, which may be attributed to their age, location, education, career, positionalities, and level of involvement in politics. Moreover, they expressed immensely different attitudes toward China’s future development. Some embrace traditional culture and cheer for China’s soaring economic advancement while others remain reserved and doubtful in some aspects; for instance, China’s wide applications of high technology in everyday life, which these latter participants find may further dominate individuals’ autonomy in unforeseeable ways.

**Identifying and Defining Chinese-ness.**

Whether transnational Chinese identify as Chinese is largely dependent on the way they define Chinese as well as the relationship they have developed with both China and the U.S. Some of my interviewees link their identity to Chinese culture, the values they hold, language they speak, and their past lived experiences. For example, USC identifies as Chinese in terms of values, language, and her past lived experiences in Hong Kong. But she also recognizes differences between Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese due to British colonial rule of Hong Kong. Further, as both of USC’s children were born and raised in the U.S. and educated as U.S. Americans, she believes that being Chinese does not mean to disregard U.S. American values or rejecting U.S. American life style. Separating legal identity from cultural identity, Xuehua sees herself as Chinese due to her language, family, cultural practices, and nationality, stating “I’ll still identify as Chinese even if I get the green card in the U.S.” Sophia also identifies as “mainland Chinese by default” due to her race. However, she is not sure culturally as she feels she is not the same as native Chinese since she has been exposed to global cultures in the U.S. for many years. Similarly, Zen identifies as Chinese because she loves Chinese culture, especially classic Chinese poems and literature. Although being a political refugee in the U.S.,
Wan still identifies as Chinese due to his upbringing in China, his relations and memories there, as well as the fact that he still sees it as his motherland. With a very different education system and political orientation, and born and raised in Taiwan, Claire identifies as Taiwanese and disidentifies with Chinese in terms of her nationality. Due to mainland China’s discourse that “There is only One China,” when I ask her why she does not identity with Chinese as she is from Republic of China (ROC), Claire seemed frustrated, “If you claim you’re the only one China, then I give it to you. We can use Taiwan to represent us.” She added, “Even if we call ourselves Taiwanese we do not lose anything we have in our Chinese-ness, which is part of Taiwanese culture or Taiwanese nationality.” To Claire, the Taiwanese have transformed from authentic Chinese identity to Taiwanese identity in the past 70 years. “It’s a very long journey. It’s about how to represent ourselves.” However, she also acknowledges that some Taiwanese are still resisting the concept of Taiwanese as they are afraid it is DPP politicians’ agenda to replace ROC with Taiwan’s independence, which, to them, is a violation of the ROC constitution. “They don’t want to be but they are,” said Claire. She further asserted, “The Chinese-ness the PRC is promoting is questionable and problematic. It makes us lose the right to claim our Chinese-ness. It’s a hegemonic and dominant discourse.”

In addition, Chinese-ness refers to nationality for some transnational Chinese while it means food and race to others. For instance, Liu Jian identifies as Chinese and Chinese American because of his culture, past, background, language, and food. He shared he was so excited that he cried when he returned to China for the first time after migrating to the U.S. Wenxi, as well, claims to be Chinese and sees it as a label given by others in the U.S., “like a measurement, based on your features such as your everyday performance, clothes you wear, accent of your English, food you eat, and your nationality.” Similarly, Zoey identifies as Chinese
because she was born there. It is her national identity. However, to her, this is not something to be particularly proud of: “It’s in my blood and cannot be changed, just like blood type. It’s just a fact.” She thus does not care much. Even Chinese history and culture, to Zoey, are neutral concepts which have gone through ups and downs. As a third generation of Korean immigrants in China, Xiaoyue sees Chinese as nationality, which is a fixed thing on the passport. It can be changed but is hard to change. Xiaoyue believes her Korean ethnicity only exists on her ID card in China. She identifies as Chinese in China and as Korean Chinese when she came to the U.S.

Many of my interviewees’ self-identification is connected to China as their birth place and primary cultural context. Living in Beijing currently, Xin sees herself as Chinese as she was “born here and theoretically Chinese. Just that simple.” At the same time, Xin also identifies as an Beijinger by default. She had no disorientation or struggle in self-identification when studying in the U.S. However, she claims that she may rethink her identity if she were hurt in some political movement. Bambi, too, sees her identity linked to China, a place of birth and where she grew up. Moreover, cultural norms, virtues, legal obligation, power of the passport, and ways of thinking can also be reasons for transnational Chinese’ self-identification. For instance, growing up in Shandong Province, the hometown of Confucius, Yang identifies as Chinese for being a member of Chinese culture and conforming to social norms, authority, and the government there. Similarly, Bing, a Han Chinese from Xinjiang, identifies as Chinese because of her cultural heritage and the traditional virtues she cherishes, such as diligence and sense of responsibility. In describing his identification, Skywalker explained, “I’m Chinese because I cannot be non-Chinese. I have to be.” China, to him, is a birth place, related to his race and ancestry. Differently, Charlie, who is naturalized as a U.S. citizen, recognizes his Chinese identity for genetic and heritage reasons. Chinese, to him, only means that China is where he is from. To
him, a country has a contracted relationship with its people: “You belong where you vote.” Thus he considers himself to be U.S. American now. As a traveler, Lexie self-identifies as Chinese because it is her birth place, where she gained her blood tie with her parents. To her, Chinese-ness also means culture, appearance, race, and nationality, things that cannot be chosen. “If I could, I wouldn’t pick Chinese because my Chinese passport is not convenient for overseas travels. Just this simple.”

However, due to exposure to both education systems and cultural contexts, some transnational Chinese tend to remain critical of China and maintain a distance from both cultures when identifying themselves. For instance, Sarah identifies as Chinese because she shares social cues, common topics, and ways of thinking with other Chinese. She has Chinese friends circles with similar background in the U.S. But sometimes she also feels in between, and identifies neither with U.S. Americans nor Chinese, due to different perspectives. Similarly, Alex self-identifies as being a part of the Chinese diaspora because of his language and ways of thinking. Although he is living in the U.S., his concerns are still there with Chinese people. Alex feels he is somewhat distant from China, but he does care about marginalized populations there such as women, workers, and political dissenters.

Obviously, my interviewees’ identification with Chinese-ness, to a large extent, depends upon how they understand Chinese and China, which can be also linked to their experiences in the U.S. The following section will unfold how the specific transnational location reinforces at multiple levels the self-identification of transnational Chinese living in the U.S.

**The Thickness of Chinese-ness.**

Positioned in the transnational context, Chinese-ness signifies particular meanings to each transnational Chinese I interviewed. Through comparison and contrast, critique and reflection, they have developed a unique way to engage Chinese-ness, a location where they find
belonging, reject dominance, and maintain independence in their search of new ways of living as transnationals who stride on multiple borders, perspectives, philosophies with layered identities. To my transnational Chinese interviewees, their understanding of Chinese-ness is full of pride, nostalgia, criticism, uncertainty, and expectation. It is emotional, cultural, physical, racial, political, economic, and personal.

For some of my participants, Chinese-ness with transnational experiences is a privilege, which has broadened their worldview and horizon. They enjoy swimming between different perspectives. For instance, USC links Chinese-ness to Chinese values and language which she cherishes in her daily life with her family and friends. At the same time, she has another set of networking and linguistic skills socialized in the U.S. that allow for her professional development. Sophia, too, sees China as her home country, where her education, family, cultural roots, history, favorite foods, geographic bond, and pride are located. She also recognizes that she has very different views on certain political issues from “Chinese Chinese.” Being Chinese in the U.S. means “having linguistic struggles, being too shy to reach out for help, and being nobody.” China, to Zen, as well, is a place of birth and a place from a distance. Chinese means part of her cultural heritage. She is very proud of the wisdom, vision, and grandeur in those ancient classic Chinese poems she loves. However, to some, Chinese-ness from a transnational perspective signifies identity struggles for it no longer matches what was ascribed to be Chinese previously. For example, to Wenxi, China means home. Chinese, however, means a culture in which she has to be an ideal Chinese heterosexual female. Similarly, Chinese identity, in the U.S., means being more critical of China as an academic and dealing with stereotypes of her being “an ideal Asian female, [who is] submissive, hardworking, with long hair, taking care of people.” Similarly, Vivian sees China as a place where she was born and raised. China is her
motherland that shaped her personality and behavior. Her transnational identity thus makes her struggle between being a model daughter and abiding by her sexual identity. To be a model daughter means she has to fulfill many responsibilities such as entering a heterosexual marriage and bearing children as well as hiding her non-conforming sexual orientation. Despite the struggle, though, she also feels she has become more open-minded now with many layers of identity.

My interviewees revealed that when their identity is marginalized or threatened in the U.S., they tend to claim belonging from their previous culture. For instance, to Zoey, China is a place of birth, where she grew up and whose consulates are her supporter in the U.S. To her, China means fast economic development and advanced infrastructure across the country. However, she also thinks about the wealth gap between Chinese in China. To be Chinese in the U.S., to Zoey, means minority identity which may receive a bit more tolerance and patience from the locals. It also comes with linguistic discrimination and sometimes exaggerated enthusiasm such as peculiarly passionate greetings she receives, and both make her feel like an Other. To Bambi, similarly, Chinese means the most beautiful culture in the world. “You know? The ancient classic literature, art work, and too many things. If I could choose again, I still want to be Chinese.” Bambi says she is so disappointed in Western media that is full of distorted and negative reports on China, which contributes to negative impressions among U.S. Americans. “I have to pay extra attention to my mannerism as I don’t want to stain the image of my motherland,” said Bambi. For Yang, as well, “China” has become a sensitive word to him after coming to the U.S. He now pays particular attention to anything about China when hearing people taking about his birth country/culture. He feels proud when he hears positive stories but feels hurt, embarrassed, and even discriminated against when he encounters negative portrayals.
Gradually, however, he has become numb to negative narratives about China measured by the “Western double standard.” Chinese, to Yang, means all people with Chinese ancestry, including Chinese immigrants and Chinese in the Greater China Region, which cannot be defined within the constraints of national borders.

Some of my transnational Chinese interviewees, though, feel distant from and critical of China if their experiences are negative in China while positive in the U.S. For instance, Charlie, who has already settled down in the U.S. and is a naturalized U.S. citizen, perceives the U.S. to be his home, the country he has his tax contract with. To him, China is in the past tense and now only a tourist spot and a travel destination. He said, “there is a totally different set of ways of doing things in China, which can be annoying as you have to have connections to get things done and sometimes though bribery.” This is a reason why he is not very happy with the social environment of China. Similarly, Shenghan, who now is working in the U.S. on an H1B visa, sees himself as more Asian than Chinese, but he also emphasizes that which identity he claims depends on the context. China, to him, is like any other country on the earth: “It’s just another country, nothing special. I happened to grow up there and am concerned about social issues there.” Shenghan thinks to be Chinese means “it’s hard to freely express political opinions there [in China] and have more Chinese friends here [in the U.S.].” To Lexie, similarly, Chinese means a lost language as she “nearly never read or write anything in Chinese since coming to U.S.” She does not care so much though because of the cyberspace violence she experienced. “If my writing has to be censored or attacked, why should I write in Chinese then? I can write in other languages.” Lexie can speak English, French, and Spanish besides Chinese. Although frustrated with the “blocked political environment,” Lexie perceives China as a place with amazing food and tourist spots. Chinese, as well, means a culture that never changes but also
never ceases to change. Transnational Chinese, to her, means communicating with other cultural communities in the U.S. while maintaining Chinese cultural practices, such as eating Chinese food and living with Chinese roommates.

Some of my transnational Chinese interviewees do not feel that their identity has changed while others feel a drastic change of their identity which makes them more distant and critical of both cultures. For example, Sarah does not think her Chinese identity has changed much while living in the U.S. Chinese, to her, is a cultural context and she cares about its social issues; her entertainment pattern, information source, and social circles are shaped by this context. On the contrary, Xiaoyue does not want to identify as Chinese for nationality: “Deep down I’m still searching somewhere else to live if the U.S. doesn’t work out due to its more strict visa and immigration policies now.” Being ethnic Korean in China, she feels more connected to Korea. Her parents also plan to retire in Korea as they see it as a nicer place with more freedom. As Xiaoyue said, “China, externally, is more home to me due to my familiarity to it and its infrastructure. But to Korea I have internal connection.” Language wise, she is more Chinese. Culture wise, she is more Korean. “I feel less like a minority in China than in the U.S.,” she added, although Xiaoyue is a minority member in both places. “I identify with both Chinese and Korean identities. I live with Chinese-ness. But my perspective is very much Americanized,” she said. In addition, as a Taiwanese American, Claire feels distant from the U.S. and not entirely Americanized by just trying to be a part of it. In addition, she feels even more distant from China except for the cultural closeness. “Chinese, the word,” Claire continued, “cannot identify all your cultural identities. Just like one can have linguistic, national, cultural, and ethnic identities.” She added, “One way to challenge the dominant Chinese-ness is to find very specific words to give those identities a name instead of using Chinese-ness all the time.” Claire thus does not agree
that the PRC’s Chinese-ness discourse can fully represent Chinese-ness itself as it can “turn dark when politicized.” To her, Chinese is a culture and history while China means the PRC after 1949.

Previous political movements and particular engagement with the government may also change how transnational Chinese identify with Chinese-ness. For instance, since Hong Kong’s prolonged protest in 2019, Skywalker has felt bothered to think about questions related to his Chinese identity. “I feel embarrassed to have anything to do with this government [which suppressed the protest].” To him, his identification with Chinese-ness is connected to whether the Chinese government benefits or hurts its citizens’ interests. Chinese, since then, means that “I have to bear the three characters (中国人, Chinese) on my forehead wherever I go.” Sometimes, he feels he has become a token for Chinese culture and history. “Anyway, it can be positive as I may act as a bridge for intercultural understanding,” added Skywalker. Wan, as well, self-identifies as Chinese due to his past experiences there, but he also disidentifies with Chinese-ness when it comes to issues regarding Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as political dissenters. “On such occasions, I don’t feel it is my motherland. A place that doesn’t welcome and accept me, how can I see it as my motherland? I have no such a motherland that I can fight for.”

Transnational location has placed Wan in a position where he has become more objective and critical of both sides. Although “seen as a double spy from both sides,” Wan still teaches his children to embrace both cultural heritages.

Similarly, Bing, who came to the U.S. right after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Student Movement, has a strong memory about the chaotic past of China. When mentioning China, she thinks of the destroyed virtues during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). From Xinjiang, a frontier where the government controls local issues quite strictly for fear that China’s
sovereignty may be sabotaged by foreign interference through supporting Islamic extremist separatist movement there, Bing is very annoyed that her parents’ passports, like everyone else’s there, were taken by the local government. It makes travel outside China so inconvenient as they have to report to the local government to take them back each time they want to visit Bing. To Bing, this is a violation of human rights. She now thus has perplexed feelings about China with both some connection and some distance. “It’s developed so fast that our ways of understanding and interacting with it doesn’t work anymore.” Living in the U.S. for about 30 years, Bing perceives China as a totally different place now: “I have no sense of belonging there now, and I get very disoriented every time going back. Nothing is familiar to me. Going back to China is much like a task that I have to complete.” Being a scientist, Bing sees her profession as an identity without national borders. However, she does recognize the need for Chinese to promote their visibility and confidence at work.

Borrowing new cultural understanding from the U.S. to understand China and/or vice versa can also change transnational Chinese’ understanding of Chinese-ness. For example, Yang, after studying in the U.S., has had changing perspectives of China. Used to being a nationalist patriot, he now tends to read news more holistically and through a more reflexive, liberal, critical, and even rebellious lens. Similarly, although he identifies with Chinese culture, Marcus claims that “Chinese culture doesn’t mean Han culture.” To him, even Han culture is in itself not singular: “The size of China is much larger than the entire Europe, how can you see it as homogenous? It implies a double standard seeing Chinese as all the same while seeing Serbians as different from Bosnians.” To Marcus, another layer of his Chinese identity is his legal identity or nationality. But to him, Chinese as nationality also means a dominance. Thus he only wants to identify with cultural Chinese identity as he is from the region called China. To him, “Chinese is
a prescribed identity whose meanings are multi-dimensional,” such as cultural, legal, and geographical. “Chinese is not a unified identity nor unified ideology. Chinese society, as well, is in itself very plural and cannot be unpluralized anymore,” Marcus stated. Similarly, to Marcus, food and language do not make one a Chinese as everyone can pick up Chinese food and language and master it as well as Chinese. To Sarah, as well, Chinese does not necessarily merely mean nationality, immigration status, or culture. She now no longer sees China with a Han-centric perspective and she cares much about China’s minorities’ experiences. Alex, too, realizes that the transnational position pushes him to compare, question, and see things from a more balanced perspective: “Things taken for granted may not be necessarily true, the best, or even right.” Chinese, to him, can mean many different things. Yet he thinks the PRC government dominates the discourse: “I don’t think it’s good, but it’s natural, just like how Israeli government defines Israel.” In addition, Alex does not agree with some of the PRC government’s ways of handling its political dissenters and some minority groups within China through heightened surveillance over certain ethnic groups/regions for fear of separatist movements. In addition, Xuehua used to be positive about the solidarity and unity held by Chinese. But now she recognizes a lack of tolerance in such unity and solidarity. To her, nowadays China is very Han-centric and minority ethnicities are very much assimilated. At the same time, though, she also recognizes the different racial concepts in the U.S. and China due to historic differences. In China, different from the U.S., there has been a prolonged engagement between different races and ethnicities throughout its history and power relations among them have been shifting all the time.

Depending on when, how, and why they come to the U.S., as well as what profession, major, and social status they embody, my interviewees have a variety of understandings of
Chinese-ness in the transnational context, and Chinese-ness is no longer a static, unified, and flat phenomenon to them. Such complex understandings push back against the flat identities normally ascribed to them.

**Unnationalized on Renationalization and Disunified on Reunification.**

The understanding of Chinese-ness is contingent upon the understanding of China and Chinese. As discussed above, what China refers to and what Chinese means vary among transnational Chinese depending on their positionalities, location, academic, cultural, and political perspectives. Therefore, people from different backgrounds see China’s renationalization of Hong Kong and reunification of Taiwan very differently. Generally speaking, there are three different attitudes: anti-renationalization/-reunification, neutral, and pro-renationalization/-reunification.

Many transnational Chinese maintain certain reservations or a negative attitude regarding renationalization and reunification. For instance, as a Taiwanese supporting the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, the opponent party of KMT, the Chinese Nationalist Party which signed the 1992 consensus with the CCP for an eventually unified China), Claire perceives the Hong Kong protest as a consequence of the breach of the Central Government’s promise to Hong Kong’s autonomy, which “serves as a miserable example for Taiwan and pushes people in Taiwan further away from the mainland.” Seeing Taiwan as a democratic society, “unification claim is not attractive to them,” she said. Regarding the recent changes in the 台胞證/台胞证 (Taibaozheng, Taiwanese compatriot ID, an ID issued to the Taiwanese traveling to the mainland by the mainland Central Government), which is exactly the same size and color as the mainland identity card for Chinese nationals, Claire sees this move as a way to “strengthen this hegemonic discourse.” To Zen, Hong Kong people’s identity is fluid, switching from belonging to disidentification since the 1989 Tiananmen Square Student Movement. Speaking of her
perceived feeling of Hong Kongers regarding Hong Kong’s return from British colonial rule, Zen said, “just like an abducted kid coming back home noticing his mom doesn’t love him as expected.” To Zen, Hong Kong people may want to identify with China but “find nothing that they can attach to.” Regarding Taiwan, Zen perceives it as a country, whose destiny should be determined by itself and its subjectivity. “Taiwan is Taiwanese Taiwan,” Zen said.

Similarly, Marcus sees renationalization of Hong Kong as problematic: “We see it as coming back but Hong Kong people may see it as colonization.” He recognizes Hong Kong as a frontier of the mainland: “The relationship between the frontier and the empire is not the same as that between the inland and the empire.” He further contends that the Hong Kong protest is a move to resist essentialization of Hong Kong’s identity. The mainland’s intention, to Marcus, “is a nationalist attempt to essentialize identity while ignoring the fact that national identity is a social construct.” Similarly, Taiwan, from Marcus’ perspective, “is a factual independent country,” whose resistance to unification can be stronger than Hong Kong. Marcus thus does not see any possibility for a peaceful reunification. Having firsthand experience of fighting for rights of marginalized populations, Wan also supports Hong Kong people in fighting for their freedom. “Hong Kong people have their right to determine what they want,” he said. Regarding Taiwan, Wan argued that “Taiwan’s future should be decided by Taiwan people.” Shenghan, however, recognizes Hong Kong as an unquestionable part of China but stands up with Hong Kong people for their claim to be Hong Konger: “They want to claim they are Hong Konger. That’s right anyway.” Regarding Taiwan, Shenghan claimed that “Taiwan’s destiny should be determined by Taiwanese themselves.” He also recognizes that some members of the pro-unification forces in Taiwan are different from those in the mainland. “Their claim is under the condition that mainland’s political system is reformed,” which looks quite impossible in the short-term to
Shenhans. In addition, Alex attended the anti-extradition bill protest in the U.S. to show his support for Hong Kongers. However, he also acknowledges there are pro-Beijing forces in Hong Kong: “People have different reasons for supporting Central Government’s renationalization such as nationalism or benefiting from doing business. Yet everything should be done within the Basic Law.” With regards to Taiwan, Alex thinks Taiwan is a sovereign country. But he is also aware that not all Taiwanese want independence and that it is a complicated issue.

For the transnational Chinese who hold a relatively neutral perspective on the renationalization and reunification issues, their rationales also vary in different ways. For example, USC confirms that Hong Kong is part of China. However, in her opinion, renationalization would work better through making the mainland more attractive to Hong Kongers to become proud of being part of China: “Just using blood relationship or history cannot convince the younger people to return to and identify with China.” Growing up in Hong Kong, she recognizes that colonial history makes several generations disidentify with China, which was not as wealthy as Hong Kong and has become richer only in recent decades. To USC, “China needs to cultivate Hong Kong people to become Chinese citizens through education of the Basic Law, China’s government system, and development of mutual trust and respect.” Similar to USC, Skywalker thinks the Central Government did a lousy job regarding the renationalization of Hong Kong. To him, the government does not consider the history and education in Hong Kong, but simply wants Hong Kong to come home. “Whether you want to come home depends on how you feel at home,” Skywalker said. Although the shared culture, language, and blood tie make it seem natural, “if it is not attractive, why so?” Similarly, he does not think intimidation, including the netizens’ cyberspace violence, will work on Taiwan, either. Bing, who still remembers how excited she was when Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997 from British
colonial rule, perceives Hong Kong’s return as “only in theory rather in reality as the financial profits are concentrated in the hands of a few.” She said, “Hong Kong should be focused on developing its economy and redistributing the wealth [rather than protesting].” Moreover, Bing believes Hong Kong should serve as a good example for Taiwan: “If there’s no freedom in Hong Kong, why Taiwan should be unified? Moreover, remember that Taiwan has U.S. backup.”

From a different lens, Lexie perceives Hong Kongers and Taiwanese as being culturally and racially Chinese. As a cultural blend under British and Chinese influences, Lexie thinks that “Hong Kong is lost in its authenticity in Cantonese flavor and not real Western to me, who was returning from the U.S.” Some interviewees expressed that radical Hong Kong protesters’ anti-CCP sentiment makes them attracted to the anti-China Trump administration and become natural Trump supporters and believe in and love whatever Trump says. Lexie is thus very frustrated by the Trump supporters in Hong Kong: “Do they really know what they are happy about Trump’s ‘Chinese Virus’ rhetoric?” However, Lexie does understand Hong Kongers’ resistance to the Central Government’s control, including the infringement of Hong Kong’s press freedom, as she herself does not like the mainland’s Internet control, either. To her, the Central Government’s firewall strategy is nonsensical. On the one hand, it does help prevent Western media from “brainwashing” the Chinese people with China-bashing messages. On the other hand, though, the Central government itself has not done a good job in reflecting on the past political events: “Why not just spend a few pages in the history textbook talking about them? Like, five pages on the Cultural Revolution, and five pages on the Tiananmen Square Student Movement.” Lexie believes that self-reflection on the past wrongs may make the West shut up and stop bashing China. Otherwise, she said, this only “gives Hong Kong people a target to mock us.” Regarding Hong Kong’s renationalization, Lexie expressed little interest: “I don’t want this nationality as
well.” In addition, she perceives Taiwan as literally a country, but seeking independence “will only make it a U.S. puppet.” Considering mutual ties in business, educational, and cultural interactions between the two sides, “its independence appeal only goes against its benefits,” Lexie said, but then added, “Taiwan people have no need to be loyal to the mainland, though, just because they do business or go to school in the mainland.”

Being from Guangzhou, Guangdong province, where Hong Kong originally belonged prior to 1841, Sophia feels geographically close to both Hong Kong and Taiwan although with some difference. She does not read too much into the Hong Kong protest and the Taiwan issue in order to maintain internal peace. “People in Hong Kong, they live in their bubbles. They are insane,” she said. To Sophia, people from different sides live in the small world shaped by the media: “All newspapers tell different stories. You can hardly know which is true or false,” said Sophia. As for Taiwan, “If they don’t want to be Chinese, what can you say? I have no comment! I just don’t want to waste my energy on that,” Sophia added with frustration. Further, Yang’s perspective on the Hong Kong issue has shifted from compassion to strong disagreement. He first supported their appeal for democracy but dislikes the riots and vandalism. Hong Kong is a place that can hardly be renationalized in Yang’s opinion, especially after he personally experienced peer discrimination there due to speaking Mandarin Chinese while transferring flights. Regarding Taiwan, Yang pays very little attention, but he is “surprised by their claim to be an independent country,” an idea he is now gradually used to. But obviously, “Taiwan is just a chess piece of the U.S.,” Yang observed. Similarly, Vivian sees Hong Kong as part of China and Hong Kong people as part of Cantonese. While she supports the Hong Kong protest because she understands that “their struggle and protest have no right or wrong,” at the same time, she also acknowledges the riots and vandalism during the protest and feels sorry for the people who
suffered. She mentions how Hong Kongers generally strongly discriminate against mainland Chinese, especially those who do not speak Cantonese. Regarding Taiwan, Vivian shares that she does not care much about the argument over Taiwanese identity, but she does think Taiwan should not be unified if it has to go through the sufferings and chaos as is the case in Hong Kong. However, she claims that she would never talk about this topic with Taiwanese, but “the Central Government should learn from [its failed handling of] Hong Kong to improve their strategy to unify Taiwan.”

Further, stating that the world is a place where “might makes right,” Zoey feels compassionate towards people in Hong Kong. She acknowledges that Hong Kongers can fight but it may be in vain: “I stand with them. But they should be smart enough to accept the reality as history can cover all powerless cries.” On the Taiwan issue, Zoey believes that the Central Government will not allow Taiwan, on the doorstep of mainland China, to become an ally with the U.S. and Japan due to national security and military security concerns. She sees now as the best time to initiate the reunification, or to maintain status quo forever. Additionally, Charlie recognizes that Hong Kongers and Taiwanese have every right to claim their Hong Kong and Taiwanese identity as that is where they are from. However, he believes that it is good for Hong Kong to be renationalized. “The Hong Kong protest in 2019 moved too far from its original purpose so as to destroy Hong Kong’s economy,” he said. On the contrary, though, he does not care much about Taiwan’s reunification as he already sees Taiwan as a country named the ROC. He thinks China should maintain stability and peace in the neighboring region. Holding similar perspectives, Xin thinks it is nonsensical to argue about identity politics. She quoted “two types” of people from an online post she read before: “There’re two types of people in this world: somewhere people and anywhere people. Somewhere people are those who need to feel belong
somewhere while anywhere people can belong anywhere.” She thinks it is ridiculous to force disidentified people to identify or force identified people to disidentify. “Why not just focus on pragmatic development together?” asked Xin.

Wenxi holds no specific stance on Hong Kong’s renationalization. But she feels strongly resistant to academic publications that depict Hong Kong as a country. As for Taiwan, she claims that she could tell where the author is from when reviewing scholarly papers by the way they perceive Taiwan. Also, she notices that “Taiwanese like to insert some letters in their names to separate themselves from mainland Chinese.” On the reunification of Taiwan, she thinks Taiwan can never become an independent country as it is too small and always has to depend on a big power. She questions the role of the U.S. in the Taiwan issue: “They constantly sell weapons to Taiwan. I don’t know if Americans ever know about it or just pretend not to know.” Xiaoyue, as well, recognizes Hong Kong as part of China. She thinks people in Hong Kong must have a reason to protest while the Central Government, as well, has its reasons to suppress it. Further, Xiaoyue is resistant to the Western mainstream perspective on Hong Kong’s renationalization. “I feel so awkward to hear my supervisor’s comment on Hong Kong when talking to a Hong Kong student, ‘Isn’t it terrifying that Hong Kong is ruled by China?’ To me, Hong Kong is an internal issue, outsiders have no rights to talk shit about it. It’s just like the N-word to blacks. They can say it but nobody else can.” However, Xiaoyue considers Taiwan’s reunification as a more ambiguous issue in its being part of China in theory [on the constitutions of both sides] while being a country in reality. She also recognizes the possible aftermath of a military reunification, stating, “If it’s unified, there must be a stronger resistance than [that of] Hong Kong. But to claim real independence is difficult as the mainland education makes Taiwan known as an inseparable part of China.” Also, Sarah does not take sides at all regarding Hong Kong and
Taiwan. She thinks the governments on both sides have very different ideas on how to run their country. The mainland is more collectivistic but Taiwan is more democratic and pro-U.S.

Internally, Sarah strongly supports the idea that all parts of the Greater China Region should be under the Chinese roof: “I cannot imagine if you tell me 周杰倫/周杰伦 [Zhou Jielun, Jay Chou, a famous singer from Taiwan] is not Chinese.”

At the same time, many transnational Chinese maintain positive opinions on the renationalization of Hong Kong and/or reunification of Taiwan. For instance, regarding Hong Kong, Liu Jian holds a very positive attitude: “I’m happy about Hong Kong’s renationalization and support the ‘One Country Two System’ policy. I know some people advocate for Hong Kong’s independence, but why don’t they also support California and Chicago for their independence? It’s just the same logic [to Liu Jian, the fact that Hong Kong is part of China is just like California and Chicago being part of the U.S.].” Regarding Taiwan, however, Liu Jian has a very different view: “Taiwan’s path should be determined by its people.” To him, though, the fight between the mainland and Taiwan is due to clashing interests within China: “Why other provinces don’t fight?” In addition, Xuehua sees Hong Kong’s renationalization as a matter of sovereignty and a sign of China’s national power: “If you’re weak, no one cares about what you say and what you do.” She perceives the root cause of the Hong Kong protest to be “the unbearable wealth gap, which is exactly something that can be cured by the mainland’s socialist system” as the mainland has made huge progress in mobilizing resources across different sectors to successfully improve people’s lives during the past four decades. Regarding Taiwan, Xuehua remains very careful, especially when claiming her identity when there are Taiwanese around: “I’d say I’m mainland Chinese rather than Chinese,” she said. This is because, to Xuehua, the latter may cause misunderstandings that mainland Chinese want to represent all Chinese. “But
within the mainland, I don’t think this divide even exists,” she added. Although Xuehua used to see Taiwan as part of China, now she perceives it as an actual country, yet she supports China’s reunification to protect China’s national interests. Moreover, Xuehua is also very offended by the discrimination towards her friends by some Taiwanese. She shared a story with me through email some time after our interview. Once, her friends shared a hotel with two Taiwanese women. The next morning, one of the Taiwanese women could not find her toothpaste. She then asked Xuehua’s friend whether she has seen it. Her friend was very offended as this kind of question in the high context communication oriented Chinese culture is considered rude and is like saying: “You stole it!” To Xuehua, many Taiwanese have a problematic supremacist complex when communicating with mainland Chinese. Being one of “The Four Asian Tigers” due to its economic accomplishments prior to mainland China’s rise, some people from Taiwan tend to perceive the mainland and mainland Chinese through a condescending lens.

Bambi also thinks that both sides have the legitimate right to make their claims, that is, “the Central Government has the natural right to claim sovereignty over Hong Kong while people in Hong Kong also have their right to claim for independence, just like Chicago and California here [many Chinese see Hong Kong as an inseparable part of China just like Chicago and California to the U.S.], which have their reasons to claim independence but the results are not guaranteed.” Speaking of Taiwan, Bambi thinks Taiwan is not anti-unification, but anti-being ruled by the mainland: “They would love it if it is they who unify the mainland.” Bambi favors unification as she would like to see all these separate parts return to the same Chinese family.

How to perceive the Hong Kong and Taiwan issues, to a certain extent, has become an admission ticket for Chinese, especially transnational Chinese, to the identity clubs housed under a “pro-,” “neutral,” or “anti-“ labels. Heated debates between different perspectives may turn into
fierce arguments or even hostile attacks in cyberspace. Thus, transnational Chinese usually remain cautious to avoid confrontations when it comes to issues related to their identity and their perceptions of issues related to Hong Kong and Taiwan.

**An Unchanged/Changing China.**

How transnational Chinese in the U.S. make sense of Chinese-ness is not only related to their understanding of Chinese, but also to that of China, which also varies based on where they are from and who they are back in China, as well as what they do and how much they are connected to the U.S. Thus, according to a perceived, imagined, and expected reality of China, transnational Chinese have developed unique understandings of how China has changed and/or how China remains the same.

With regards to positive changes, USC, as a Hong Konger, sees China of the past as a backward and not fully open place. In 1989, for instance, the Tiananmen Square Student Movement aroused much international criticism. But USC also expressed that many students used it as an excuse to take refuge in the U.S. Differently, today’s China is on top of the U.S. agenda for political and economic reasons. Newcomers to the U.S. from China also notice changes in China. For example, Bambi used to dream about learning more about Western culture. After coming to the U.S., though, she started to appreciate Chinese culture more and realizes China’s fast economic growth as it has become a hot topic in the U.S. But the soft infrastructure (service industry) in China, according to Bambi, still needs to improve.

Similarly, Zoey used to be hyper critical of China. Her perception has totally changed after coming to the U.S. as she now recognizes how important national identity is to her in the U.S. Oftentimes, she feels that “this identity cannot be stained,” which means she does not want anybody to insult China. Further, she has now realized that social issues she used to criticize involve many layers of forces, which she did not see in her “previous naïve thought.” Wenxi
shares that she “feels behind and disoriented and needs to readjust” each time when returning to China, where social development, infrastructure, and technology are so advanced and fast evolving. Xiaoyue, who came to the U.S. as a teenager, was “so accustomed to Western thinking” and used to think of China as being economically developed but its people as brainwashed and close-minded. However, when she returns to China during holidays she now finds that “young people there are doing things I’m interested to do as well, such as activism on gender equality and LGBTQ rights. And they know how to work their way around.” Lexie, as well, is optimistic about positive social changes in China: “The government services are more humanity centered and more efficient.” For instance, a family member shared with Lexie that the rape victim report process is much simplified now in her hometown to avoid secondary victimization of rape victims.

Charlie is quite impressed with China’s capability of mobilizing resources during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, he thinks China has a great and more affordable medical system. Besides, Xin was in China during the pandemic, so she had no physical encounter with anti-Asian racism/violence in the U.S. Moreover, she is beginning to have more favorable feelings about China witnessing how the government was able to contain the virus in a timely manner and how all confirmed patients were given free treatment. While noticing we are living in a bi-polar world with two superpowers competing fiercely with each other, Xin shared some interesting trends happening in China where “more Western Internet celebrities nowadays come to live in China and promote China to the outside world.” Further, Xin acknowledges that China has improved a lot in terms of policy making, economic progress, and quality of life.

Before coming to the U.S., Sophia thought of the U.S. as being more technologically advanced. But now, she is “constantly impressed by the innovations and dedication” in the
Chinese Internet companies. As an IT manager, she has “noticed the fast growing companies and eye opening new technological applications” every time she visits China. Xuehua is also passionate about China’s fast Internet service. In addition, although she feels distant from China, Bing sees positive changes in the younger generation: “They are so expressive and open-minded. And interestingly, they don’t care much about censorship” maybe due to the availability of VPN services that allow them to climb the firewall. Shenghan, too, feels China is “generally becoming better and better in its super convenient life style such as the super advanced food delivery app system.” Similarly, Alex is amazed by China’s mobile payment and fresh food market services as well as its prominent role in the global supply chain.

Some transnational Chinese remain neutral regarding China’s changing or unchanged situation. For instance, from a more general lens, Marcus perceives Chinese culture as remaining the same despite others’ critiques. He also realizes the instability and lesser strength of China’s economy during the trade war. To Yang, although hearing from Western media repeatedly that China is a country with no beliefs, he always believes that “Chinese have our own belief, which is our culture” besides numerous local religions. Marcus also embraces the idea that “It’s [the Chinese belief] just not the Western type.” Zen sees everything as fluid, ever changing, and unpredictable. But things remaining unchanged in China, to her, include the too unified way of thinking and unhealthy competition.

Interestingly, Claire used to see China as her homeland as her parents are immigrants from the mainland to Taiwan. After coming to the U.S., though, she has started to reframe Chinese as a heritage, “which is worth promoting but one from Taiwanese perspective, from the margin.” More intriguingly, Wan observes China through a shifting lens by looking at its changes in the past four decades. He sees the first decade (1980-1990) being vibrant after chaotic
political movements; the second decade (1990-2000) as a decade of awakening; the third decade (2000-2010) as the most lively, free, and fast developing; and the fourth decade (2010-2020) as a frozen decade with more surveillance and political regression despite the progressing economy which can be attributed to people’s hard work and abstinence. Also, although holding the same negative attitude toward the Central Government’s suppression of the OCLP Movement, i.e., Occupy Central with Love and Peace, in Hong Kong in 2014, Skywalker has noticed that young people in Hong Kong have become more radical now. With no exception, though, Skywalker still cares more about “whether the people are insulted rather than whether the government is insulted because the latter is the one who holds more power.”

Perceived negative changes also play a big role in how transnational Chinese relate to China. For example, Sarah’s perspective on China has changed but it is irrelevant to her life in the U.S. Rather, it changed because of Xi’s changes to the Constitution to enable longer terms for himself. This indirectly makes her more receptive to others’ disidentification with Chinese-ness. Similarly, Xiaoyue thinks that although everything in her city, Guangzhou, seems to be upgraded, the “Internet environment [is] going downhill and [there is] more censorship and suppression to different voices.” However, interestingly, she also notices lots of emerging grassroots Internet celebrities on the Chinese Internet. To Lexie, although she “still loves classic culture and Chinese food,” she is bothered by the nationalism and hate speech on the Internet as well as cultural censorship on entertainment, including a strong sense of political correctness and binaristic thinking. Similarly, Xuehua has also realized the strengthened Internet surveillance and censorship and that “people are angry but unable to resist.” Alex, too, has questioned issues such as the regressed freedom of speech and facial recognition technology which may infringe upon privacy. He believes that it is time for the government to undertake political reform now.
Additionally, Shenghan recognizes the imbalanced regional economic development in China and the down turning political climate. Moreover, Sarah also complains about speech control on the Internet by deleting “sensitive messages,” which pushes people to censor themselves before even posting anything.

Furthermore, there are other social and cultural traits that many of my transnational Chinese interviewees feel strongly opposed to. For example, Xin thinks certain aspects of China and Chinese culture still remain the same such as its collectivism, strong social hierarchy, objectification of women, firewall, and less modernized rural areas. Besides, Charlie has negative feelings about traditional Chinese medicine, which is prosperous in China, since one of his relatives died after treatment by a traditional Chinese doctor in the U.S. Differing from Charlie, Sophia thinks things remain unchanged in China including social pressure and the political climate: “Gender expectations are insane. People on TV shows all look and behave the same.” Thus, she is “on the U.S. side on these things [as a woman].” As a woman, Wenxi is also quite critical of social expectations for women, treatment of rape victims, and superficial revivals of traditional culture. “Teaching ancient Chinese literature without selection, which is also subject to Western gaze,” to Wenxi, “should be reconsidered and neoliberalist education should come to a stop while remaining cautious about brain drain in China.” Wenxi has strong opinions on traditional Chinese clothes as well. She critiqued that the Qipao is just one of many traditional clothes in China: “It is not inclusive enough due to its hidden classist [a tailored Qipao dress is too expensive for many] and sexist [it’s designed only for certain female body shape] implications.”

As described above, transnational Chinese in the U.S. define and identify with Chinese-ness in different ways influenced by their positionalities. Thus, their understandings of Chinese-
ness are not static and unified. The thickness of Chinese-ness, as well, is related not only to how they perceive Chinese, but also to the ways in which they perceive China and China’s handling of social and political issues, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Section 2: Alternative Understandings of Chinese-ness

RQ3: What is at Stake in Understanding Chinese-ness in a Transnational Context That Necessitates an Alternative Theorization of Race to Dominant/White U.S. Race Ideology?

Transnational Chinese understand their identities in interestingly diverging ways, as all my interviewees explained. Having lived in both China and the U.S., some claim to have multiple homes, some see the world as their home, while others do not feel at home anywhere or do not feel they ever need a home at all. One big similarity they all share is the multi-layered, fluid identities they have developed living in the U.S. as transnational Chinese. Moreover, they seem to have very little in common regarding political views, body politics in the U.S., attitudes about the future, and feelings about China and the U.S. These nuances make it impossible to use a uniform logic to understand Chinese-ness(es) in the transnational context. Transnational identities situated in complex power relations thus call for alternative theorizations of race and identity that enable more specific, complex, and multi-faceted understandings of identity from a transnational perspective. The following will contribute to such an understanding through exploring the themes of unrooted belonging, multi-faceted Otherness/possibilities, the American dream, and messed-up identities/Chinese-ness of transnational Chinese in the U.S.

Unrooted Belonging.

Identity for transnational Chinese is largely determined by the felt belonging they have with their home culture and/or host culture. Due to different privileges and disadvantages they have experienced in both contexts, some of them favor their home culture while others prefer the host culture. Still others feel distant from both cultures. The majority, though, struggle between
two cultures as they enjoy privileges in some aspects of their lives and feel disadvantaged in others in both cultural contexts. This results in a sense of unrooted belonging as transnational Chinese in the U.S.

Some transnational Chinese see both cultures as significant to their lives while others cannot clearly tell where they indeed belong. For example, Zoey perceives China as home, where her language and family are from and from which she can never cut off her ties. However, the U.S. is also an important place in her life where she can be herself and feel relaxed and free. Differently, Shenghan does not really know where he is from and who he is because his family has moved between many different places in China. When asked where he is from, he needs to say, “I’m from place A, but I’m also from place B and place C.”

Institutional restraints including visa status, job limitations, and unstable immigration policies, as well as negative media discourses about China and Chinese may lead to transnational Chinese’ sense of alienation from the U.S. and closeness to China. For instance, Bambi sees China as the birth mother, who is not perfect, and that this is where she belongs. She sees the U.S. as the step mother, who might look better but gives no emotional support. In addition, Yang also takes China as his homeland, birth place, and the cultural source of his language and experiences. On the contrary, the U.S., to him, is a place he has no membership to. However, focused more on their international student identity, some transnational Chinese feel alienated from China while more connected to the U.S. For instance, Skywalker, who sees himself as native Chinese when in China, a taken for granted fact, feels quite distant to this identity after reading about Chinese netizens’ attacks on overseas Chinese students, blaming them for flying back to China to spread the Covid-19 virus during the pandemic when returning to visit. Since then, he has begun to distrust China while putting more trust in the U.S. In addition, due to
previous perceptions of China, transnational Chinese may also develop a sense of disconnection to China. For example, Bing sees China as a past home but not motherland. To her, motherland is too emotional a concept and she has contradictory feelings about China. As mentioned earlier, Bing came to the U.S. after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Student Movement. Compared to the U.S. back then, she has had an impression that it was very hard to get things done in China. In addition, she has experienced the information gap with friends in China that makes it hard to further her friendships with them from a distance.

Constructed reality shaped and reinforced by media discourses can be both a blessing and a curse to some transnational Chinese. For instance, enjoying the abundant freedom of speech in the U.S., Charlie also feels insecure sometimes because of the identity politics, divide and fight, and racial tensions in the U.S. However, with censored speech, he cannot stand the firewall in China as well. Further, the contradiction between avowed identity and ascribed identity can largely shape transnational Chinese’ experience of belonging. For example, Wenxi claims that her Chinese identity comes with a lot of false assumptions: “When you are surrounded by all these presumptions, criticism, and stereotypes, you feel stronger connections with China.” However, to Wenxi, this is also an imagined China because she feels disoriented every time she goes back. On the other hand, compared with her identities in China as mainland Chinese, Han, majority member, and native-Mandarin speaker, she now is a minority and racial Other in the U.S., and just wants to “get out of here.” Emotions and personal/family history may also play a role in transnational Chinese’ sense of belonging. For example Claire, who sees China as a country hostile to Taiwan, feels she is living in a gray area as both a U.S. and Taiwanese citizen. She speaks Mandarin and Hakka rather than the dominant Hokkien in Taiwan and is perceived as 外省人 (Waishengren, outsider from another province). She may also be perceived as Chinese by
mainlanders, but the mainland is not where she fully belongs. In the U.S., too, she falls into the “Asian” category, but it is “a given identity, which I don’t know what it means.”

For the majority of transnational Chinese in this study, their sense of unrooted belonging is largely constituted by their nuanced relationships with both cultures. They find merits and demerits in both cultures and do not understand them in oversimplified ways. They live and move in between cultures flexibly, and they also have struggles due to their in-between identities. For instance, USC perceives China as her homeland and the U.S. as the best place for an academic career. China, to her, is “a birth mother” who has a “strange relationship with Hong Kong” due to historical reasons. She travels to China a lot due to work-related reasons, but now is not used to the crowded and busy Hong Kong. As a U.S. American citizen, similarly, she feels it is hard to assimilate into U.S. American cultures and values (such as drinking culture and sports culture), and thus she feels she has become a perpetual foreigner. Moreover, she is seen as U.S. American in Hong Kong for having a different attitude and behaviors. However, her U.S. American-ness is less compared with her kids’. Her kids, according to her, are “very expressive, open, laughing a lot, and easy going with strangers.” Similarly, Sophia, coming from Guangzhou, feels a close connection with New York City. She explains that this is due to her Guangzhou experience and memories as both places are huge cities with similar life styles and access to everything. However, she dislikes the gender expectations of women in China and race oriented body politics in the U.S. Regarding becoming a person of color, she asked with confusion: “Isn’t white a color?”

Xiaoyue sits somewhere in between and does not like to think in extremes. She feels distant enough from both sides and is critical toward both. She is detached from CCP authority, but does not see it as a dictatorship. In addition, while not liking the censorship and online
nationalism in China, she is aware that China is where her cultural roots are and that it is the country to which she is culturally and linguistically close. She also enjoys the safety in China where people freely enjoy events late into the night. Further, although she does not feel culturally related to the U.S. (especially when it comes to party culture, pop TV, and sports), the U.S., to her, is a freer society. However, while she enjoys more freedom of speech in the U.S., she dislikes its unsafe environment, extreme divides, and the chaotic political debates. Returning to China, though, Xiaoyue said she has to hide in front of her peers by not talking about her life in the U.S. to prevent being seen as showing off her privilege. Intriguingly, for practical reasons, Lexie does not want her Chinese citizenship/nationality although she identifies as culturally and racially Chinese because the Chinese passport enables less “travel freedom” with its limited power: “China is a homeland that I don’t want to go back to. I love the culture and history but not the PRC part. I love its food and scenic spots but not the online nationalism and keyboard warriors.” When it comes to the U.S., Lexie sees a huge job market here but the immigration policies set lots of restraints for international students. She said she may consider a third English speaking country for a career later: “As long as there is freedom of speech, the U.S. is not a must.”

At the same time, educated in the U.S. while distanced from China, some transnational Chinese feel they are in a huge dilemma when it comes to the matter of belonging and home. For instance, although she sees China as her home, a place where her parents live and where she spent much of her time, Vivian feels overwhelmed when thinking about going back to work in China, where she would have to develop her network from point zero. The U.S., though, is a second home to Vivian, where she got her degree, professional training, and work experiences. She has gained an entire set of terminology and understanding of her own field in the U.S.
However, the U.S. is not where her parents want to move to, let alone the fact that the temporary work visa she holds right now cannot guarantee a legal status for her to stay much longer. Similarly, Sarah shares the same concerns regarding career and life in both places. Seeing China as a home with attachment, where her parents are, where she can get her favorite foods, and where her research most fits, Sarah feels China’s current environment is not very friendly to the radical activism she is pursuing. She is thus concerned about the limited academic freedom for activism in China if she decides to go back. Additionally, Sarah feels marginalized in China as she has very little in common with her peers when it comes to favorite topics and political views and this is due to their different life and educational experiences. The U.S., similarly, is a good place and ideal for her passion, but she always feels homesick, and especially misses her favorite foods in China.

**Multi-faceted Otherness/Possibilities.**

Socially constructed identity categories discipline not only who we are, but also impact what privileges we enjoy and what we do not. Such identity boxes compartmentalize the population of a society into different groups, designating who is included or excluded by these identity markers. Different societies tend to employ different identity categories for its population. For example, in China, where race and political affiliation do not play predominant roles, class, gender, education, place, and age matter much more. In the U.S., an immigrant country, however, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation, and class play a significant role in people’s daily lives. Transnational Chinese, who cross national borders, enjoy privileges and also suffer from exclusions in both countries in different ways. Border crossing may condition their Otherness when moving from China to the U.S. by further downgrading them, further privileging them, or uplifting some while downcutting other aspects of their lives depending on their intersectional positionalities in both societies. Due to different intersectional
belonging/privileges they enjoy and exclusion/disadvantages they suffer based on the above-mentioned identity markers, each of them has very specific experiences in the culture they arrive into. They may share some similarities in certain identity experiences, e.g., racial discrimination. However, they may also largely differ from each other with regards to their privileges, e.g., their education and profession that are shaping and shaped by their class. Therefore, understanding their multi-layered identities according to the unified Chinese-ness ascribed in China and/or in the U.S. enormously limits our imagination and understanding of the complexities of identity experiences of transnational Chinese.

Some of my transnational Chinese interviewees tend to transform their identity disadvantages into possibilities in order to fulfill their professional goals. On such occasions, they choose some identities rather than others based on needs. For instance, USC, who enjoys a high social status in the U.S. and also suffers from prejudice for her national origin, perceives her dual identities, bilingual abilities, and knowledge of two cultures as a privilege and bridge between the two countries. However, she is aware that being an overseas Chinese with dual identities is a double-edged sword. Although claiming that knowledge has no boundaries, USC feels she needs to be cautious about her frequent travels and academic exchanges with China. She finds it is hard to determine loyalty as a global citizen. But she thinks she is doing the right thing by sharing knowledge with Chinese, who are eager to learn from the U.S. and have the right to live a good life and access knowledge. Similarly, as a graduate student at a prestigious U.S. university, Sarah tries her best to learn new knowledge and perspectives to apply to Chinese society. Sarah claims that identity is an issue only when you are outside your original cultural context. She did not know what China meant until a trip to the U.S. during her high school years. She saw a protest against China on the street and started to think about her identity. Recently, she
has also been questioning the nationalist comments in Chinese cyberspace, where “people not politically correct may be bullied by the keyboard warriors.” From a distance, she notices more problems in China. However, Sarah is still attached to China and feels hurt when hearing criticisms and attacks against it, such as Covid-19 conspiracy theories. But she always takes the positive side: “There’re always already people defending for me even before my own defense in our super liberal school.” Intriguingly enough, some transnational Chinese tend to embrace their avowed identity, although marginalized, in the U.S. rather than the ascribed identity. For instance, Claire used to tell a long story about her cultural Chinese and national Taiwanese identity. But now she makes it more simple and easy by just saying, “I’m Taiwanese.”

As a to-be-scholar, Xuehua also takes advantage of her academic trainings in both countries as an opportunity to understand both societies. After studying in the U.S., she has gained some new understanding of race in China. For instance, although Chinese think that they are descendants of the dragon, the people of 中華/中华 (Zhonghua, China, with a literary and classic taste), and that the Great Wall serves as a positive symbol of China, Xuehua poses questions on these taken for granted, very Han-centric discourses. To her, the Great Wall also means a demarcation between Us and Them (Han and other ethnicities) for its historic and military function as a national border to prohibit the “northern barbarians” from invading China over 2,000 years ago. In addition, regarding racial relations and class in the two countries, Xuehua argues that marriage, including interethnic marriage, in China can be a remedy for the wealth/class gap (racial and ethnic mix has always been encouraged throughout Chinese history as a means either to strengthen ties for ordinary people or to expand power for royal families) while racial hierarchies make it difficult to stitch the racial gap through interracial marriage in the U.S. Similarly, Marcus has doubts about and disagrees with the Han-centric race complex in
the “yellow skin, black eyes” discourse in China prevalent in popular cultural products, which, to him, is a meta-oppression above other oppressive forms, such as intercultural, interracial, gendered, and religious oppressions as it is a Han-centric biologic feature not necessarily shared by all the other 55 ethnicities. In addition, Marcus also realizes there are lots of misconceptions about China in the U.S. such as “crony-capitalism, totalitarianism, and communism, none of which is China’s reality” to him. He perceives these perceptions as “a brutal essentialization due to lack of imagination, which is very Orientalist and may only lead to distorted understanding of this ancient multi-cultural empire,” Marcus added. “There’re also freedom and religions in China for sure. Just not the Western type,” he said. Besides, Marcus also avoids sharing his birth place in the U.S. to avoid racial and national stereotypes: “Because when you say you’re from Xinjiang, people would ask: ‘Are you good at dancing?’ When you say you’re from Inner Mongolia, they would ask: ‘Can you ride a horse?’” He prefers a citizenship identity rather than a nationalized Chinese identity: “I’m from China. But I see this as my civil responsibility and civil rights.” To Marcus, citizenship is a legal concept but nationality means dominance.

Furthermore, although identity should be understood in an intersectional way, transnational Chinese may take advantage of the most salient identity markers that work in their favor to develop belonging to the U.S., thus transforming their Otherness into possibility. For example, as a U.S. citizen, Liu Jian sees Chinese as his cultural root and heritage while the U.S. is an open window for him, where he has received his education, gained a different way of thinking, and become more accomplished and socially involved. He believes his experiences in the U.S. are enriching and positive. Similarly, some transnational Chinese tend to distance racial Otherness from their personal life. For instance, being a well-educated, masculine male, Skywalker does not think he has ever encountered any racism in the U.S.: “Skin color doesn’t
matter much.” What he recognizes are the different religious and cultural groups. However, he admits that people still ask him, “Why are you here?” Working environment and legal status may help transnational Chinese positively engage with the new culture while ignoring other existing disadvantages. Employed in a Japanese-owned company, speaking better English there, and being a permanent U.S. resident, Charlie sees the U.S. as his new home, a place to where he pays taxes, and with which he has a legal contract: “I don’t feel the need to belong to certain country and feel obliged to do something for it.”

In addition, a sense of accomplishment at work, stable and high income, and uplifted network can also contribute to the transformation of transnational Chinese’ experiences from negative to positive, such as in the cases of Sophia and Xin. Sophia’s life is blended with Chinese and U.S. influence. As a manager of an IT company in the Bay Area, she sees the U.S. as the most diverse society and a new world broadening her perspective and allowing for a new way of living despite her racial and linguistic Otherness. Xin, as well, has a special place for the U.S. in her heart as it offered her a platform where she expanded and uplifted her friends circle. She did, however, recognize the cultural barriers and implicit discriminations she has experienced in the U.S. Additionally, some transnational Chinese who enjoy such privileges tend to adapt more to U.S. culture and assimilate to local standards to avoid Otherness. For example, as a natural scientist, Bing acknowledges that academic exchange now in the U.S. is highly politicized. However, she also questions the ethics of some Chinese professionals regarding intellectual property: “Their individual conduct impacts other academics’ wellbeing and the reputation of made-in-China brand.” To Bing, these individuals need to learn not only new knowledge but also respect the ethical practices in the U.S.
Due to gender, sexual orientation, class, political, racial, and discursive reasons, some transnational Chinese enjoy less privilege while suffering from more identity disadvantages after crossing national borders. These experiences, including new identity experiences that are irrelevant in China while unique for U.S. society, may bring double burdens, if not more, or Otherness into their lives. For instance, Bambi’s identities are linked to places such as her city and province in China while her race becomes a primary identifier in the U.S. Similarly, there is class discrimination based on the city/rural binary in China which can be true in the U.S. as well (but in a different way). Identifying as a big-city middle-class woman in China while Asian in the U.S., Bambi finds it hard to deal with Asian racial stereotypes and is sensitive to others’ attitude towards her, especially during the ongoing U.S.-China trade war. In addition, identifying primarily with nationality, place, nation, family role, and ethnicity in China, Yang is a male Han Chinese father from Shandong Province. However, after coming to the U.S., Yang finds he has to identify as an Other, both racially and in terms of class, because now he has become Asian and an international TA who is not allowed to work off-campus but lives on a graduate stipend. Very differently, Wenxi feels her mainland Chinese identity makes her vulnerable in the U.S. She has thus become very sensitive to the variation of assumptions about Chinese, such as the ideas that all Chinese are communists, criticism of China without knowing anything about China, and “Chinese Virus” hate speech. “After hearing too much of such nonsense, I get so tired of it and stop explaining,” Wenxi said with frustration. Also, being an Asian in the U.S., she feels she is often perceived with the assumption that all Asians are the same and that Asian experiences are not worth learning about (e.g., accepting wearing masks for societal good during a pandemic, a collectivist cultural orientation). Further, Wenxi feels she can never fully embrace Chinese ideologies or its political ideologies, nor U.S. ideologies. China means home to her, but it is an
imagined home that she no longer belongs to. The U.S., as well, is not home to her. She is currently working as a visiting assistant professor and has been offered a tenure-track position elsewhere. To her, home means a stable job, and a life of buying a home and settling down.

Multi-layered Otherness may lead to perplexing identity experiences for some transnational Chinese. For example, as a political refugee from China for his activism for HIV patients and marginalized people’s legal rights, and now naturalized as a U.S. citizen, Wan is perceived as an American spy in China for his political views and radical social activism. In the U.S., on the other hand, he is seen as a Chinese/Communist spy by some Chinese Americans. Now, self-employed with a small business due to the difficulty of finding jobs, Wan has no issue identifying with China or Chinese as he speaks the language and his customers are Chinese: “Being Chinese doesn’t discipline me!” Wan remains critical of both China and the U.S.

Similarly, for Vivian, her minority ethnic identity in China, racial identity in the U.S., and gender and sexual orientation in both countries add heavy burdens to her transnational experiences. Back in China, Vivian is identified as 黎族 (Li ethnicity). She recalled her childhood when she was bullied by her classmates due to her curly hair and different appearance. Being a minority, she had to straighten her hair to look more like Han girls. In addition, she was struggling with her sexual identity back then due to lack of information. In the U.S., she identifies as Chinese, Asian, and bi-sexual, which opens a new journey for her to explore more possibilities. However, Vivian claims that her sexual identity is contradictory to what she believes a typical and good Chinese daughter should be like. Also, multiple Otherness may make some transnational Chinese suffer from self-denial to fit into the dominant ideology or political correctness. Wenxi shared the story of her uncle, a Chinese American working for the U.S. government, who has great animosity against China. Wenxi cannot comprehend “why a person who speaks Chinese language, cooks
Chinese food, and makes Chinese friends openly denies his Chinese identity.” “Maybe,” she summarized, “he has to perform Whiteness and detach himself from Chinese-ness to protect himself and his family.”

**The American Dream?**

Transnational Chinese live across at least two countries and cultural contexts where body politics works both in similar and different ways. Many of their identity experiences in the U.S., such as racialization and linguistic Otherness, may not exist or be irrelevant to them in China and thus are not expected before their arrival. Unpreparedness, in addition to over-glorification of the U.S. in U.S. media channels, may have an immense impact on their (dis)identification with Chinese-ness. Generally speaking, the amount of culture shocks they experience upon their arrival in the U.S. impact how connected they feel to China and to what extent they lean toward their Chinese identity. The more their expectations match with U.S. reality, the better they adapt to the new environment and develop balanced views about both societies. However, as social and geopolitical conditions shift, transnational Chinese’ experiences and views on both countries may also change from time to time. In addition, favorable perceptions always come with the privilege and positive identity experiences they enjoy. And vice versa.

Transnational Chinese with positive or uplifting experiences, i.e., those who enjoy more privileges, convenience, and possibilities compared to when they lived in China, tend to find their American dream realized. For instance, the U.S. is an efficient society to Skywalker for a few reasons, including its “quick reaction to social issues, open to reforming its laws, being a better economy, and having more advanced technology.” He read and watched lots of positive stories about the U.S. in China and saw it as a civilized society with a humanity first orientation. He still feels positively about its freedom of speech, low power distance social structure, and lower levels of bureaucracy compared to China. Similarly, Zen used to imagine the U.S. as a
society with highly educated people, content lifestyle, and efficient and transparent governance system when she was in China. Upon arrival she found out that some people are impolite, some do not know about governance, and some are angry and complain about what they take for granted; however, she still sees the U.S. as “a beautiful possibility” for her as she feels she can “do much more here and have more impact on the society as an individual.” Zen holds confidence in the U.S.’ progress. She loves its accessible information, efficient system, and perceives the mainstream media’s “sensationalism” some accuse it of as a timely warning to its society.

In addition, being focused on research, Xuehua sees the U.S. as a good academic destination for future career development. She always wanted to improve her English reading abilities and have access to original classic literature rather than translated versions. After coming here, she has begun to acknowledge the merits of the U.S., which, to Xuehua, are also “reasons for U.S. hegemony.” She thinks China should learn from the U.S. while, at the same time, she also recognizes the U.S.’ social problems, such as poverty, discrimination, and systemic racism. As an academic, Xuehua was amused to find out after her arrival here that a lot of original academic tomes are actually in Europe. Generally, Xuehua still perceives the U.S. as a society protecting life, free expression, and personal property, and U.S. academia as an ideal environment for her with its enjoyable and mature scholarly community. Further, before moving here in late 1980s, Bing got to know the U.S. first though listening to Family Album USA back in China, which she had to do with caution due to the political atmosphere then (Cold War era). Though it was risky, she thought she was just following the tide and did not think much about it. Due to the large development gap back then between the U.S. and China, she was very impressed with the easier and convenient life in the U.S., which, to her, is an efficient and
altruistic society. Also, Bing does perceive the media in the U.S. to be sensational and misleading.

Younger transnational Chinese who have more access to information about life and education in the U.S. before coming here usually have a more accurate assessment of U.S. society. For example, Xiaoyue saw the U.S. as a place of freedom with more options for her to pursue her art dream. Now she still perceives it as a place to study, live, and work even though she experienced culture shock upon her arrival here during her high school years. She found out that people here go to school not only to study but also to socialize, and this imposed a lot of social pressure on her. She also noticed her linguistic disadvantage and limited opportunities as a foreigner. Shenghan, similarly, while knowing the U.S. has both good and bad sides like any society, looked forward to studying in the U.S. for its high quality education. The U.S., to him, was a society protecting identity diversity as he had heard gay marriage had started becoming legalized in 2005. He had planned to work here if possible. After coming to the U.S., he feels his assessment is quite accurate, but he has also learned some negatives of this society, such as the wealth gap, racism, anti-intellectualism trend during the pandemic, and the price of freedom of speech. Generally speaking, Shenghan enjoys his job here as an IT engineer. Compared to China, where he felt lots of peer pressure for marriage, he feels the U.S. has a more free, relaxed, and diverse environment. Moreover, he is paid more with less workload compared to China. Sarah, similarly, who is a graduate student now, dreamed about studying here in the U.S. which is imagined to be a free space with lots of choices and better education. She still feels the same after coming here. Studying at a very liberal college, she is amazed by the self-critique in U.S. education. However, Sarah is also able to see lots of issues that are not shown on U.S. produced movies she had watched before, for example issues such as racism and the plight of homeless
people. In the very left leaning environment she is in, she even feels she is a little bit right
leaning. Sarah is much involved in activism in the U.S., but she has also realized that many ways
of doing activism here do not apply to China.

Moreover, transnational Chinese with a more intersectional lens on social issues and their
own experiences tend to have more balanced views about the U.S. For instance, USC is admired
in China for being a professor from the U.S. and is suspected in the U.S. as she is Chinese
American. She embraces both cultures and perceives U.S. academia as ideal for an academic
career. Culturally Chinese, she is seen as a U.S. American in Hong Kong. However, she finds it
hard to assimilate to U.S. American culture. In a slightly different vein, Yang, with shifted
perspectives, sees the U.S. as a place where he has reformed his ideology and experienced
isolation/exclusion as well as positive transition. In China, he saw the U.S. as the most powerful
country playing the role of world police and interfering in other countries’ internal issues. Now,
he perceives the U.S. in a more balanced way by comparing the two cultures. Similarly, before
coming to the U.S., Marcus looked up to the U.S. with a lot of hope for its diversity, Western
lifestyle, and social equality. He now still perceives the U.S. as a normal society with both good
and bad, rich and poor, and as an open society with well-preserved nature and environment: “I’m
still quite shocked by some Americans’ mannerism and different habits, like walking on the floor
with socks on,” Marcus said with a laugh. As a political refugee, Wan sees the U.S. as a shelter
of protection as it has saved him three times when he was in danger. Now having lived here for
quite some time, he sees it with a more balanced view. For instance, he likes ordinary U.S.
American people rather than the politicians. He admires how carefree people here are even
without money in their pockets. However, Wan also recognizes some flaws in the U.S.:

“It does not practice democracy in international politics. There are some strong
conservative forces. Some Americans are arrogant. They cannot see their own weaknesses and don’t know how to admit their defeat. They don’t know how to ask for help or accept help. And they seldom learn from others, either.”

In addition, Wan perceives the wealth gap and social inequality as big issues U.S. American society is facing. However, he loves the democratic atmosphere here and the many kind-hearted people he has encountered who always have a positive attitude toward life.

Transnational Chinese with less expectations, or those who remain open to the unexpected, tend to be more receptive to changing situations and hold balanced views about the U.S. For example, Vivian, who did not have any major expectations, just followed her friends and prepared for all the tests to study here. Now working in the U.S., helping the LGBTQ community for HIV prevention, she is confused about what the American dream means to her: “To help people or to pursue my own dream?” Although she knows the two can be the same, sometimes they are not compatible because her work can be quite stressful. Similarly, Alex had no concept about the U.S. at all. He knew about it only through television and U.S. American movies. He was too young then, and studying in the U.S. was his parents’ idea. He was good at English and thus he came here. After coming here, he found that he became more successful academically and the curriculum was more balanced and simpler. He agrees that the U.S. is a society with freedom of speech and an ideal country where all people are expected to be protected by law. Gradually, he has developed high expectations and believes that U.S. democracy is a light on the hill for the world. Now as the U.S. struggles with the idea of its own image as a beacon, he is disappointed, especially in the context of the current U.S.-China trade war, the pandemic, and the rise of populism and racism.

Liu Jian took the U.S. as a destination of immigration as he knew since he was very
young that he would move to the U.S. one day: “I had no choice. I just followed my parents.” He did not have many expectations before coming here. But he perceives it as a fair society where his parents get well paid with hard work even without degrees. However, he sighed, “There are no entertainments like those in China.” Additionally, Zoey used to see the U.S. as a good place to study, a place of freedom, and a better place than China, where middle class people live a more comfortable life. It was a “looking up” stance. Now, she sees the U.S. with an equal stance and has become more objective. She feels her life in the U.S. is more relaxed with less motivation to compete. In the U.S., she can be herself. However, she also recognizes social problems in the U.S., such as class stratification and fixation and U.S. American style democracy which is not something she knew about or had imagined. Similarly, Charlie saw the U.S. as an ideal place to study and have a career in when in China. He was then a physics major with an American dream perceiving the U.S. as having the most advanced technology. He realized how limited his knowledge of the U.S. was after coming here. He has gradually learned about the high medical cost and capitalization of everything, which gradually extinguished his “beaconism illusion.” He does not personally experience racism, but the overarching racial tensions make him feel insecure sometimes. As a Trump supporter, though, he agrees with Trump’s decision on retrieving troops from the Middle East as well as his use of “China Virus” rhetoric as he believes this term only refers to China as being the first place where the virus was spotted: “And this is a fact.”

Transnational Chinese whose favorite values match predominant U.S. social values tend to validate their border crossing choice. For example, Lexie was attracted to the U.S. American life style she learned about through U.S. movies. Being good at English, she decided to come here and have a look at the outside world. Initially, she only wanted to stay and “enjoy a
comfortable life here and assimilate into American culture because it is so cool” to her. She was proud of speaking and reading English all day while being ashamed of watching Chinese movies. Gradually, however, she begins to ask herself why she was doing this and “how about your own identity?” From Taiwan, Claire perceived the U.S. as an ally to Taiwan against communist China. The U.S. also means the last resort against war to her as Taiwan used to be a fort to fight mainland China. Claire’s family first moved to Taiwan from the mainland in 1949 with the KMT after the civil war with the CCP. After the 1979 U.S. recognition of the PRC as the representative of China, which used to be the ROC, they again moved to the U.S. to escape possible military conflict in an unstable Taiwan. Since then, she has always had a plan to move to the U.S. However, living in a small rural town now in the U.S. is disorienting to her because her hometown, Taipei, is a huge and busy city. However, she tries to persuade herself that one measure of a good country should be its rural society. And she believes that the rural towns in the U.S. generally offer a good quality of life.

Transnational Chinese who have encountered more downgrading experiences, i.e., heightened Otherness, may find their border crossing a failed American dream to a certain extent. For instance, Bambi imagined the U.S. as an ideal place for pursuing a Ph.D. and thought everything here is advanced. After coming to the U.S., she has a more realistic picture of U.S. society including social problems that she was unaware of back in China, such as poor quality of public schools, racism, and a huge wealth gap. She especially emphasized the media biases against China which upsets her a lot. Coming from a big city in China and being highly educated, Bambi lived a high quality life there. However, after arrival in the U.S., and knowing very little about U.S. culture and its politics, she experienced becoming a minority. This made her fall even more in love with China, which she always wants to defend upon hearing what she
perceives to be wrong media reports about her birth culture. Similarly, Xin looked up to the U.S. for better social networks and study and career opportunities when in China. But after coming here, she realized the constraints and difficulties she had to face in everyday life, constraints related to her nationality, race, language, socializing and job opportunities, and she became anxious and disappointed. Wenxi, also used to see the U.S. as the best country in the world advanced in everything and with lots of freedom. It was her dream land where she thought she could escape the sexism she faced in China. After coming to the U.S., however, having struggled with issues, such as linguistic marginalization and capital driven politics, she realized how naïve she used to be: “How is it a free country when not everyone enjoys equal human rights?” As a green card holder now, she still feels “a sense of being a foreigner who is always tied to communism and blamed by whatever happens, such as the trade war and Covid-19.”

**Messed-Up Identities/Chinese-ness.**

The messiness of transnational Chinese-ness is signified in its plurality, fluidity, emotionality, relationality, contradiction, and nuances. Perhaps we need to shift our conceptualization from “Chinese-ness” to “Chinese-nesses.” Chinese-nesses are different from the ascribed Chinese-ness in China with a broad and ambiguous meaning, nor are they similar to the Chinese-ness in the U.S. with Othering racial/colonial, political/Cold War, and linguistic connotations. Chinese-nesses are also self-identifications and avowed identities, which are positive, creative, specific, and uniquely embedded into transnational Chinese’ everyday experiences. The multiple layers of Chinese-nesses may parallel, overlap, and be mutually exclusive while contradictorily co-existing with each other. They are transnational, subjective, and open to predictable and unpredictable possibilities.

To be specific, transnational Chinese tend to link their identities to cultural experiences, including food, language, place of origin, entertainment, education, memory, past experiences.
For instance, Sophia identifies herself as Chinese but of Cantonese origin. Chinese, to Wan, means past memory and experiences, which are only part of him. It also means diligence and being good at business. Charlie sees part of his identity linked to China, his past home, the cultural home where his habits regarding food, language, media consumption, and education were shaped.

Some transnational Chinese relate their identity to emotional attachment and contradictory feelings. For example, Bambi, as Chinese, is angry about the “wrong media reports on China.” Yang, similarly, is proud of China’s 5000 years of history while also frustrated by its unhealthy social operations based on social connection, nepotism, and even bribery. Now, he sees China as a nostalgic home and feels “jealous of others who are able to fly back home.” Like Bambi, being from a collectivistic culture and having a large sense of facework, Yang also feels “embarrassed by the immensely negative portrayals of China” after coming to the U.S.

In addition, transnational Chinese’ identities are vulnerable to racial discrimination that is openly forbidden while socially prevalent. For instance, although USC is highly respected in China, she is suspected in the U.S. Being a U.S. American citizen, she is able to move between two cultures but remains cautious of her China links during the U.S.-China tensions.

Transnational Chinese’ self-identification comes with shifting experiences. For example Zoey, who used to be very critical of China, now perceives China as her backup and supporter. The U.S., to her, “is like a mirror for me to see China” and she has become more tolerant and understanding of the Chinese government. Similarly, after coming to the U.S., Vivian has become less cynical about China as she has seen and heard so much negative U.S. media coverage that is not true at all. She then feels proud of being Chinese.

The relational aspect plays a big role in the identification of my transnational Chinese
interviewees. For instance, Skywalker’s negative feelings about China and his Chinese identity comes from his poor relationship with his parents, who are divorced. Similarly, for Vivian, being Chinese means to fulfill her desire to be a daughter who takes care of her parents.

Further, transnational Chinese identify with their ethnicity with little awareness of the ethnic hierarchy in China, and this differs from the racial hierarchies in the U.S. For example, to Xin, Chinese to everybody in China is the same. It is taken-for-granted and invisible as a majority member. Chinese is a cultural and life concept to her. Being Chinese in the U.S., though, becomes something peculiar and makes her a minority. Similarly, Xiaoyue, who is of Korean ethnicity in China, identifies more with her Chinese identity rather than Korean ethnicity in China as “ethnicity doesn’t stand out unless I tell people.” In the U.S., Xiaoyue identifies with both Chinese (nationality) and Korean (ethnicity) identities as well as Asian (race), which does not exist in Chinese consciousness. Zoey, as well, identifies as Chinese, Southerner, and 土家族 (Tujia ethnicity). To her, ethnicity is an identification existing only on her ID card, and something that may add more points to her college entrance exam grades. Tujia, to Zoey, is not so much of a minority identity: “We have our own costumes, language, and we mutually borrow language from each other.” When being asked if she is too assimilated into Han culture, she seemed offended, became emotional, and strongly rejected the idea: “What do you mean by assimilation? I’m just Chinese. My country represents my identity. I don’t even need to mention I’m a minority in China.”

To many transnational Chinese, their identity is connected to their place of origin and their house registration. For instance, Wenxi, as a Tianjin person, says that Tianjin is where she is from and where her house registration is; this may also signify one’s class and social status as housing prices are much higher in bigger cities. Similarly, Lexie identifies with her city and
region in China as does Liu Jian, who has little awareness of his identity in China as she is Han Chinese. Sophia, as well, sees Chinese being only geographically different but ethnically homogenous. Many of my interviewees’ idea about China being an ethnically homogeneous society is personally interesting to me since as a Han Chinese living in Yunnan, a southwest province in China with 26 ethnicities, ethnic diversity has always been the pride and identity of my province.

Moreover, history and geopolitics may largely impact how transnational Chinese identify with Chinese-ness. For example, Claire sees herself as Chinese from Taiwan and a citizen of ROC, which, to her, is the representative of authentic Chinese because they embrace and preserve Chinese cultural heritage, national historic treasure, traditional Chinese characters, traditional values, religious activities, and Confucian teaching and ethics. Although in the ROC constitution, mainland China is part of ROC, Claire perceives it only as a fiction rather than reality, and as a nostalgia over its lost land. After coming to the U.S., she has begun to see herself as Taiwanese and sees mainland Chinese students as different. She shifted her narratives about her identity to align it with the post-1990 Taiwanese discourse to decentralize Chinese identity and localize Taiwanese identity. The PRC’s maintaining of Chinese identity on the mainland, to Claire, is ridiculous. “I was wondering if mainlanders are learning something fictional” when referring to the fact that mainland Chinese are taught that Taiwan is part of China. Marcus, as well, claims that his Chinese-ness is linked to his love for Chinese history, a history ranging from 5,000 years ago till today including its prehistoric era, its first unified empire of Qin Dynasty, Tang Dynasty, Genghis Khan’s/Mongolian Yuan Dynasty, Manchurian Qing Dynasty, and more, and not only the PRC. To Marcus, the PRC is merely like a dynasty within the long Chinese history and his love for Chinese history is not limited to a single
dynasty. China, to him, is where all peoples on this land throughout its history live and prosper, which neither Han nor the PRC can solely represent.

To some transnational Chinese, lack of freedom of speech on politics has become part of their Chinese identity. For instance, not until after coming to attend high school in the U.S., did Xiaoyue realize that freedom of (political) speech is censored in China. She then became more “Westernized” when discussing political issues, some of which may be considered “sensitive topics” in China. As a young person, she wanted more freedom and did not want to obey rules. For Shenghan as well, freedom of speech is among the most important reasons that he does not want to return to China.

Additionally, many transnational Chinese recognize that their Chinese identity never remains static, but is a fluid, shifting, contextual, and relative concept. For example, Zen recognizes that one’s identity is determined by the person asking you about it. For instance, she identifies as Chinese if asked by U.S. Americans, as a person of Xinjiang region if asked by mainland Chinese, and a person of her own city if asked by Xinjiang people. Also, she sees cultural identity as something one can choose while national and racial identity as given identities which one cannot choose. Zen chooses not to associate her identity with a huge country and large population because she perceives identity experience as always local and specific. She further claims that identity is a shifting concept and cannot be positioned. For example, she feels like a stranger now going back to China. She has no cultural familiarity with the modern skyscrapers, and the old disrepair still stuck in her memories has all disappeared. The only things which remain familiar to her are people’s appearance, attires, and language. These are like comfort food to her, what she loves the most.

At the same time, some transnational Chinese identify with Chinese-ness due to their
citizenship and nationality while others reject such identification. For instance, Liu Jian sees part of his identity as Chinese because he used to be a Chinese citizen. However, Marcus would rather be identified with his name first to escape the dominance of social structure embedded in his nationality.

Interestingly, transnational Chinese may determine whether they are Chinese according to whether it is relevant to their current lives. For example Bing, whose children were born and raised in the U.S. (and her family are all here as well) cares much more about the U.S. now as it is more relevant to her. She now values her American-ness over her Chinese-ness.

Most transnational Chinese, though, see their identities as multiple and even shaky. For instance, USC’s identities have changed from Hong Konger in China to Chinese, Asian, and Chinese American in the U.S. Similarly, to Lexie, her Chinese-ness is related to China, which is her home, birth place, and one and only root where her friends and family are. At the same time, she also started identifying as an international student after coming to the U.S. Interestingly, Zen thinks she does not need to belong anywhere and that she is simply an earthling. However, she does have an attachment to New York. Zen’s preferred identity order is woman, mother, and nature lover. She claims that identity is a false concept and one just belongs to oneself. To Zen, China is a cultural influence on her, and she loves Chinese culture and ancient poems.

Further, in addition to other identifiers, the Chinese governance style can be a factor for some transnational Chinese for the purpose of (dis)identifying with Chinese-ness. For instance, Shenghan, being a person from many places in China, thinks identity is a contextual concept depending on what others ask you. To him, China is a cultural influence, a place where his family is and a place where he grew up and has fond memories of; these exist alongside the negative aspects such as the firewall, peer pressure and other cultural aspects that he does not
miss so much. His understanding of China includes its people, history, and governance style while Chinese means people in mainland China. In the global context, though, China primarily means the Chinese government and sometimes can also mean the culture and the geographic region while Chinese to him has multiple meanings.

Transnational Chinese, after shifting location to the U.S., may have an enriched understanding of their Chinese-ness with their different positionalities in both cultural contexts. For example, Sarah used to see China as a taken for granted concept in China and Chinese as 中华民族/中华民族 (Zhonghuaminzu, the Chinese, a more cultural rather than racial identity), as the real Chinese identity. After coming to the U.S., she realized the concept of 中华民族/中华民族 to be an essentialized identity. She now perceives Chinese as mainland Han Chinese. She believes that other ethnicities may prioritize their ethnic identity over their national Chinese identity. However, in a foreign context, they probably may identify with both ethnic and national identities. Sarah’s perception here is very similar to Xiaoyue’s identity experience in the U.S. as both an ethnic Korean and Chinese.

Swimming in between cultures, transnational Chinese may develop a more nuanced understanding of Chinese-ness(es) in shifting transnational contexts. For instance, Alex identifies as a Han and Beijing Shenzhen person. He self-identifies as Han although his grandparents are ethnic minorities (in China, people can choose which ethnicity they want to register as long as it is one of their direct family members’ ethnicity). As a Han, he grew up being of mainstream ethnicity in China. In the U.S., however, he is identified as national Chinese and cultural Chinese and Asian. China, to Alex, is his home, place of birth and where his parents live. Chinese, though, means people living in China. After coming to the U.S., he has realized that Chinese Americans are different from Chinese. Some American born Chinese (ABCs) do
not want to be referred to as Chinese, which, to Alex, might be because they prefer their U.S. American identity rather than the Chinese identity. Alex does not want to be categorized with Chinese American as well because he acknowledges that he grew up as a person of mainstream ethnicity (read: inclusion) person in China while Chinese Americans grow up as minorities (read: exclusion) in the U.S. These are two very different experiences and positionalities.

The interviews I conducted amply demonstrate how messy the communicative construction of Chinese-ness really is in a transnational context, and there are still possibly many more layers hidden that future studies may reveal. But the one thing which is certain is that there is no singular definition of what Chinese-ness(es) is(are) and what it(they) entail(s), in terms of how people experience and communicate the concept. It is a thick and fluid concept that is unique to each transnational Chinese based on their lived experiences and subject to their own understandings while also constrained by the larger social context on both sides. Chinese-ness, to transnational Chinese, cannot be compartmentalized within the limited identity categories specific to either cultural context. Being exposed to a broader world with multiple sets of cultural references, they are flexible enough to creatively identify, dis-identify, or even counter-identify with either their avowed identities, or ascribed identities, or both in either or both cultural contexts. The complexities, specificities, and particularities of their transnational identity experiences, thus, cannot be adequately understood within the confines of simple intersections of constructed identities. Therefore, this research project serves as a response to the call for an alternative theorization of race and identity from a transnational perspective with much thicker intersectionalities being taken into account.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

The Unsettlement Continues

Finally, I am able to type the word “finally” here to conclude this dissertation, which has been a long journey of searching and understanding the identities of transnational Chinese living in the U.S. amidst the pandemic and a suspended trade war. It is late January of 2021, two weeks after the Capitol riot, with Donald Trump leaving the White House as the one-term 45th U.S. president and Joseph Biden entering as the 46th. Since the summer of 2013, I have witnessed three U.S. presidents in office as an international student. Holding an F1 visa, I have been vigilant of my legal status powered directly by its changing validity periods designated by presidents’ executive orders. I have also paid particular attention to U.S. immigration policies that may determine our job prospects and grace period that restricts how many days we are allowed to linger in the U.S. after graduation. The blatant state racism, widely spread in the West through the “China Threat” political rhetoric and “Chinese Virus” hate speech, has shown me in its literal sense that the personal is political and vice versa. Like riding on a rollercoaster, no one really knows what is going to happen next during this uncertainty. Every four years, different groups of people, especially racial, religious, and political minorities, may fear that it could be their turn to be the target this time. In the past four years, it has been the Chinese’ turn to swallow the blames for matters such as the pandemic, technological competition, and even the geopolitical battle between the U.S. and China.

Even a few weeks before Donald Trump left the White House, he did not forget to blacklist more Chinese technology companies by prohibiting U.S. companies from doing business with them (Duffy, 2021; Reuters, 2020b). More Chinese stocks were banned from
entering the New York stock market as well (Osipovich & Ping, 2021). These companies are believed to have ties to the CCP and/or Chinese military simply because they are based in China or established by Chinese. Trump’s executive orders against these companies have largely impaired the U.S. economy in this global era, where a local economy can no longer operate by itself alone. Ironically, these orders also go against Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan and promise. Further, U.S. academia is not free from persecution, either. For instance, on Jan. 4th, Gang Chen, a China-born U.S. citizen, and prominent professor and researcher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), was arrested by the Boston FBI due to suspected “grant fraud” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021). After the arrest, MIT president L. Rafael Reif wrote in a letter to the MIT community that the news was “surprising, deeply distressing, and hard to understand” (Global Times, 2021, para. 13). Following the president’s letter, 100 MIT faculty signed a letter on the same day objecting to the criminal accusation against Gang Chen (Niewenhuis, 2021). In the letter, they contended that the allegations against Gang Chen are against “academic freedom of this country” and their “defense of Gang Chen is the defense of the scientific enterprise” that they “will hold dear” (Suo, 2021). Rao Yi, a Chinese neurobiologist, also addressed a letter to MIT stating that the arrest of Gang Chen by the Boston FBI is “nothing but thinly veiled racism” (Global Times, 2021, para. 1).

Over 139 years ago, the Chinese Exclusion Act banned the Chinese from working in the U.S. and/or becoming U.S. citizen due to fear of the “Yellow Peril.” After World War II, and due to Cold War politics between the former Soviet Union and the U.S., fear of communism swept the West. In the U.S., this fear soon turned into the “Red Scare” promoted by the McCarthyism to persecute communists who had just fled Nazi Germany for the U.S. during the two World Wars. Seven decades have passed, but little has changed and history continues to repeat itself. In
the 21st century U.S., I have witnessed a coated version of “Yellow Peril” in its latest form of “Chinese Virus” and an updated version of the “Red Scare” in the Trump administration’s all-around persecution of China-/Chinese-related persons and enterprises. Transnational Chinese are constantly reminded that they are foreigners and outsiders, never a member of “Us.” Even if naturalized as U.S. citizens, like professor Gang Chen, they are still considered disloyal and untrustworthy and are targets of suspicion. During the past administration, political power in the U.S. was abused and weaponized by Trump and his loyal media channels to openly target transnational Chinese and Asians, which is an official permission to attack and harm them without being held accountable. Furthermore, U.S. institutions, including the White House and the FBI as well as mainstream media, were manipulated as instruments of state racism targeting Chinese, including transnational Chinese, U.S. society’s once glorified “Model Minority,” and their businesses. Richard Wolff, a Marxist economist and professor emeritus at University of Massachusetts, Amhurst, states it well: “Trump did not bring fascism to the U.S. It was the fascism in the U.S. that found Trump. He is a tool for it, not the other way around” (Wolff, 2021). Trump is obviously not the starter of Sinophobia, neither is his retreat the end of Sinophobia. Now, he is no longer the president of the United States, but his legacy, Trumpism, along with long-existing White supremacy, will continue to be embraced by his loyal followers and other White supremacists. Similarly, the repercussion and ripple effect of Trump’s use of state racism as a weapon is believed to continue to stir unrest and distrust within U.S. society.

As a transnational Chinese myself studying and teaching in the U.S. for over seven years now, I have learned how significant one’s identity, especially racial identity, is to their lived experiences and understanding of Self in the U.S. Transferring from a location where I never needed to question who I am (at least not in terms of the Western concept of race), to a space
where race plays an immense role in one’s wellbeing, I have developed a keen awareness of becoming minoritized, which, in turn, helps me reflect and question my taken-for-granted identity back in China in relation to minorities in that cultural context (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017). Looking back, I have found that my previously avowed identity in China was indeed also a constructed, ascribed identity. Who I am in my eyes may not necessarily match who I am in others’ eyes both in China and when time, place, and space shift me to another context. Our positionalities, including ethnicity, race, class, education, ability, religion, and political views, may determine how much we know and do not know about ourselves and others. The world is like a complex of bubbles, within which we co-exist and see each other while not necessarily understanding one another until we break through our own bubbles to reach out into uncharted waters. It is because of this shifted and shifting positionality that I, as a beginner intercultural communication scholar, decided to research this topic to explore what it means for transnational Chinese living in the U.S. and the communicative sense they make of their Chinese-ness in a transnational context. Further, based on such an exploration, I attempted to theorize race and identity from an alternative, transnational perspective with a post- and decolonial focus to deconstruct the ascribed Chinese-nesses both in the U.S. and Chinese contexts. This project thus provided me with an opportunity to bring together my research interests in identity, post- and decolonial studies, and intercultural communication.

**Crisscross In-betweenness**

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Holding this guide in mind, I came to the U.S. looking forward to a life, in which I may speak, write, and publish in English and eventually get my doctorate degree in a discipline I dearly love. Like most of my interviewees, I swam into the U.S. American bubble with all my knowledge of the outside world shaped and nurtured in the
Chinese bubble, where I read, spoke, and wrote about China from within. In Chinese, 美國/美国, the U.S., means a beautiful country. It is also a mysterious place that I only learned from the Chinese texts and Chinese media from a distance. Then, I came to the U.S., and started to read, speak, and write about it from within while learning about China from the U.S. American texts and Western media from a distance. Years of learning, relearning, and unlearning from both cultures, I have developed a mixed consciousness culturally, mentally, and intellectually while physically remaining the same except for more gray hair. It is now nearly impossible for me to tell anymore what behavior, idea, and way of thinking is purely American or Chinese. Similarly shockingly, I have found that my command in English is still not as good as native-English speakers while my Chinese is no longer as good as native-Chinese speakers. My English can be detected immediately because of its “foreign” accent due to the influence of Chinese pronunciation. My Chinese, as well, is blended with English expressions due to untranslatables. During the job search in which I am currently engaged, I have noticed I have become undesirable in both countries due to the pandemic related job scarcity as well as maybe currently because of my national origin in the U.S. and unwanted scholarly specializations for Chinese universities who prefer social scientific and applied researchers. Fear in China and xenophobia in the U.S. have further labeled me, like other transnational Chinese, as a potential virus carrier as I am from places where Covid-19 was first reported and where the number of cases reported and the death toll have been high. I am stuck in a location where neither am I welcome to stay in the U.S. nor can I return to China in any simple way since I have changed since I left as have the geopolitical relations between the U.S. and China. Like many of my interviewees, I am caught in between.

Being a Stranger on a Strange Shore.

Similar to but also different from my experience, my transnational Chinese participants have all gone through and are still living in this troubling in-betweenness, and as liminal aliens in
the U.S. To them, being transnational Chinese in the U.S. means to be assigned a racial identity that they had never experienced nor expected before coming to the U.S. Besides, being linguistic and cultural insiders in China does not provide them with adequate knowledge and skills to prepare for the new outsider identity in the U.S., which they have to adapt to. In addition, due to interracial and interethnic mixing throughout China’s history, race and ethnicity do not play a big role in their Chinese experiences. They thus encounter culture shocks from being ascribed as racial Others and linguistic foreigners due to their physical appearance and non-native English accent. They start to unlearn what they learned in the Chinese context and relearn new ways of speaking, living, and networking to survive and prosper. They also begin to develop an awareness of and a different understanding of body politics and political correctness that fit the U.S. context.

However, with experiences learned in both cultural bubbles and living with at least two different philosophies, their ways of thinking and doing things are different both from local U.S. Americans in the U.S. and Chinese in China. Like apple juice blended with orange juice, it is hardly possible to separate in their lives which is American and which is Chinese. They may feel attached academically to the U.S. while culturally to China. They may also feel alienated racially from the U.S. while politically from China. They may be sometimes in love with both while distant from both at other times. Their hybridized identities push them to the crossroad, at which they refuse to take sides but sometimes have to due to material restrictions. During the Sino-U.S. trade tensions and the pandemic, for instance, some transnational Chinese have to remain cautious and distant from China in order to show loyalty to the U.S. and not be suspected as spies. Some others, though, have to make decisions or plan to move somewhere else due to tightened U.S. immigration policies as well as an unhealthily competitive job market in China.
Swimming Across Bubbles.

Coming from different regions during different times with different ethnic backgrounds, my transnational Chinese participants have developed nuanced understandings of their Chinese identities based on how they interpret and relate to the concepts of China and Chinese. In addition, their experiences in China and the U.S., including their class, education level, legal status, profession, and geographical region, largely impact their relationship with both China and the U.S., which, in turn, affects their views of both countries as well as their self-identification. Generally speaking, the more privileged they are in the U.S., the less attached they feel to China. On the contrary, the more difficulties and disadvantages they encounter in the U.S. compared to when they lived in China, the more they identify with their Chinese identity. Exposed to at least two sets of philosophies and cultural knowledges, they are able to flexibly move in and across these two worlds. Their capabilities of zooming in and out of both cultural contexts provide them with more sophisticated understandings of social and political issues in China. Their memories, imaginations, and expectations of China also vary from one another due to the differences in their age, profession, engagement with, and experiences in China.

My participants define their Chinese-ness based on their understandings of China and Chinese. Some of them consider their Chinese-ness in the transnational context as a privilege while others think of it as a constraint. Some perceive China as a geographical concept while others think of China as a personal, emotional, political, cultural, historic, economic, and even relational concept. Similarly, they share different ideas with regards to Chinese. While some communicated that Chinese is a cultural, historic, racial, or ethnic concept, many of them linked the meanings of Chinese to language, food, literature, family, memory, education, or past experience. Their understandings and communication of Chinese-ness are so multi-layered and nuanced that the ambiguous term of “Chinese” in both cultural contexts seems too arbitrary and
flat to dictate their identity. This also manifests in their political views, especially those on China’s plan to renationalize Hong Kong after its return from British colonial rule and reunify Taiwan. Although nearly all of them think of Hong Kong as part of China and support its renationalization, some of them do not agree with the way the mainland handled the Hong Kong protest. Some of them, however, criticize Hong Kong rioters’ violence against civilians and vandalism of public facilities. In terms of Taiwan, many of them consider it as literally an independent country although theoretically part of China on its constitution. They started feeling this way especially after they came to the U.S. and became exposed to Taiwanese in a transnational context. Still others, though, with a “unified Greater China” complex, hope to have both Hong Kong and Taiwan under the same Chinese roof for China’s national security and interests. Even so, their complex seems to have nothing to do with their perception of the CCP, but rather can be attributed more to their sense of cultural belonging.

Their differing perspectives are not only limited to the issues of Hong Kong and Taiwan, but also spread to other social and political phenomena in China. China and Chinese culture, to most of them, are both changing and unchanged. For instance, most of the participants have noticed the fast development of China’s economy, infrastructure, and technological application in everyday life. Some of them also realized China’s significance to the global economy and politics as well as its more efficient governance and capability of mobilizing resources. Others, though, criticize the growing censorship on the Internet, more stringent control of political disagreement, and strong nationalist climate in the cyberspace in China. Those who experienced discrimination or disadvantages in China found the situation unchanged. For example, the desire for unity is still the norm; gender expectations and beauty standards for women remain rigid; the firewall still prevents easy access to outside information although VPN services are available.
Lost in Limbo.

Transnational Chinese identities, according to my participants, are never static and unified, and thus cannot be taken for granted by any ascribed identity markers in either the Chinese or U.S. context. Their sense of belonging, due to the in-between experiences, is hard to neatly split. They are no longer willing to take sides or claim full allegiance to either culture/country. Similarly, it is nearly impossible, as well, for them to cut off their ties to both contexts. Their identities are multi-layered and shaped in both cultures. When the two countries are in conflict, they feel the pressures the most, and their lives and wellbeing are most impacted as well.

Nearly all of my participants have experienced racial marginalization in the U.S., i.e., by being perceived as a foreigner, racial Other, and linguistic outsider. Some others, additionally, are troubled by institutional discriminations and constraints, including racism targeting Asians, unstable immigration policies, and repercussions from worsening Sino-U.S. relations. Many of them, however, have benefitted from their transnational experiences, which uplifted their friend circles, broadened their horizon and knowledge, and provided them with more opportunities on the global stage. Furthermore, their identification with Chinese-ness is, to a great extent, dependent on their experiences in both cultural contexts. Many of them have positive experiences in the U.S. compared to China while some have more positive experiences in China. Still others, though, have positive and negative experiences in both contexts. Therefore, based on specific comparison and contrast, they have differential identifications with both cultures on particular aspects. They have become unrooted beings with messy identities in the transnational space. With worsening trade tensions between the U.S. and China, they, even if already naturalized as U.S. citizens, are perceived as foreigners in both countries, i.e., as Chinese in the U.S. while as U.S. American in China. During the pandemic, similarly, in the U.S. their bodies
mark them as possible Chinese spies and as bodies signifying “Chinese Virus.” In China, they could be marked as traitors due to their tie to the U.S.

**Transnational, Thicker, Intersectional Chinese-ness(es)**

This in-between, limbo location, for the transnational Chinese, is both a blessing and a curse. While being able to move across bubbles and have a broader worldview, they may also feel lost in this limbo. After all, though, their self-identification as transnational Chinese has very little in common with nation-state-specific identity ascriptions in both the U.S. and China. That is to say, based on dominant U.S. race logic in the U.S., they are perceived as “Yellow Peril,” racial Other, linguistic foreigner, or Model Minority. Resisting these ambiguous ascriptions of Chinese-ness assigned to them, my participants strongly deny these labels because they are problematic and discriminatory. The dominant U.S. race logic, from a binaristic and hierarchical perspective, is very limiting and problematic to their sense of self. Such a colonial mentality reinforces open racism and West/White supremacy. On the other hand, the transnational Chinese do not necessarily conform to the flat Chinese discourse from the mainland Han-centric Chinese perspective, which positions mainland Han Chinese as the only legitimate representative of Chinese identity. Even though they may have previously identified as such, they no longer do so in the transnational context. Similarly, they are not the “authentic” Chinese depicted in the Chinese discourse, either, who share the same, unified understanding and stance on every issue related to China. Further, neither do they necessarily subscribe to CCP ideologies and nor do they completely resist U.S. philosophy and values simply because of their Chinese ancestry. On the contrary, they are actively engaged in their U.S. experiences and many make contributions to the U.S. as its citizen. At the same time, many of them are concerned about China’s development and social issues while remaining critical of its mistakes and limitations. Therefore, a more
nuanced, transnational, and thicker understanding of Chinese-ness and identity in the transnational context is critical. This is what I have attempted in this dissertation.

My rationales for employing the theories of transnationalism (Kraidy, 2005) and thick(er) intersectionalities (Yep, 2010, 2016) as a conceptual framework are grounded upon something I referred to in this project as “Multi-colored Otherness,” on which Chinese identity has been constructed in the U.S. context. From the colonially connotated term of “Yellow Peril,” to the ideologically driven Cold War concept of “Red Scare,” to today’s objectifying racist rhetoric of “Chinese Virus,” the narrating of Chinese as a threat, enemy, and perpetual foreigner has never ceased to gain and regain its power. Chinese in general, and transnational Chinese in particular, are reduced to a population with a flat Chinese-ness, a questionable “race” with remarkable racial, economic, political, linguistic, behavioral, and cultural differences contradicting dominant White U.S. American standards. However, as stated earlier, a uniform and flat understanding of Chinese-ness not only shadows the colonial legacies the West has imposed across different regions of China, but also veils the colonial relations within the Asia Pacific region. Moreover, this race logic also glosses over the nuances within the Chinese communities due to their (un)shared past, stages of economic development, cultural heritages, and political pursuits, which are repeatedly evident in the words of my interviewees.

Shome and Hegde (2002a) call for a disruption of the colonial binary distinction between Self and Other through unsettling and restaging difference in the context of globalization. In addition, Bardhan and Zhang (2017) argue that race is a “floating signifier” in the mobile, globalizing world today (p. 289). Race, indeed, is never just about itself (Yep, 2010), and thus its “symbolic and material consequences” need to be further investigated (p. 172). As a contested domain, race requires contextualization within certain historical traditions and power relations as
well as sociological and temporal forces (Ono, 2010). Transnational bodies of “color,” specifically, always already live their racialized experiences intertwined with other identity markers or social categories at micro, meso, and macro levels simultaneously. This further demands a resignification of race as more than a reductionist biological signifier. Theories of transnationalism and thick(er) intersectionalities, therefore, may fulfill this task to a large extent.

On the one hand, transnationalism (Kraidy, 2005) provides us with a more flexible understanding and complex performance of our identities. It urges us to think through cultural identities beyond the confines of geographic and national borders. It also allows us to move from and into multiple directions and live with multiple contradictory identity narratives with border crossings. On the other hand, thick(er) intersectionalities (Yep, 2010) helps locate our focus on more specific and embodied ways of theorizing about intersectional identities by examining the omnipresence of complex and shifting power relations in all social relations at all moments. Thus, a multi-layered understanding of more complex and nuanced particularities of transnational individuals’ lives and identities situated in specific time and space can be achieved by taking into account, but not limited to, as many as their identity experiences, such as those related to race, class, gender, sexuality, national locations and so on. Further, through thorough investigation, special attention needs to be paid to the intersectional relations between “individual subjectivity, personal agency, systemic arrangements, and structural forces” in the historical and geopolitical contexts (Yep, 2010, p. 173).

As mentioned elsewhere, in today’s globalizing world where colonial legacies continue to linger, identity and belonging are brought into question in the so-called “post-colonial” and “post-modern” world. When bodies of “color” move across national/cultural borders, they confront race ideologies that are both locally specific and reflect larger colonial ideologies in
nuanced ways (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017). Therefore, a question regarding the word “decolonizing” in the title of this dissertation is also brought into attention. Is decolonization even possible? I would say the answer is both a “Yes” and a “No.” I say “Yes” because only through decolonizing our mentality and subjectivities can we build intercultural alliances across difference. By understanding the intricate power relations between Us and the Other inherited from the colonial past, we can then recognize the barriers and acknowledge the struggles that the Other has to negotiate which may not have registered in our consciousness. A more socially just society may thus become (possibly) one step closer. I say “No” because a “post-colonial” society, just like the so-called “post-racial” society, is by no means a concrete reality. At best, it is our naïve imagination and heartfelt yearning. It should have happened; but unfortunately, it has not happened yet. The globalizing world today is still rooted in the European colonial powers’ influence and ideological control of the globe which started over 500 years ago. The lingering impact manifested in today’s racial relations, international relations, and geopolitical distribution of wealth, and so forth, was, is, and will still be with us for an unpredictably lengthy future. In other words, the “decolonizing” I refer to in the title of this dissertation is both a good wish and a hope, and simultaneously a question mark. Fortunately, within the “Yes,” I have found the potential to resist the flat, binary, or uniform understanding of Chinese-ness in the transnational context. I am also bearing the earnest sincerity while writing this dissertation project that my work, in solidarity with other scholars doing similar work, may hold strength together to resist dominant/White U.S. race ideology against its flat understanding of various post-colonial identities. I also hope my effort in complicating the understanding of Chinese identities may shed light on the understanding of identities of other cultural groups, which may be already oversimplified in their ascribed labels.
Therefore, the alternative theorization of race I advocate in this research is a theorization and understanding of identity and race within more complex power relations at the micro, meso, and macro levels in the transnational playing field of identity and communication. Specific attention must be given to more nuanced theorization and understanding of the fluid, contradictory, and incomplete identity experiences of racialized bodies crossing geographical and national borders in today’s globalizing world. The alternative theorization thus means a more liberating in-between identity theorization in the transnational context with a resistance to the binaristic and flat understandings of race and identity within limiting and singular historic and national confines.

What is Missing?

While wrapping up this dissertation project, I noticed a few limitations of my study. First of all, almost all of my participants are upper middle class, highly educated, and enjoy great privileges in both the U.S. and China in different ways. Their understandings of Chinese-ness, although very diverse already, may be limited in providing a wider frame of knowledge regarding Chinese-ness. Further, due to the echo chamber effect, many participants were recruited via the snowball method through interviewees’ referrals. The limitation of this is obvious in that many of them may come from similar social circles with similar class status, education level, and political views. Third, as my participants are mostly first-generation (im)migrants, other transnational Chinese experiences, including second and third generation Chinese, i.e., American born Chinese (ABCs), were not taken into account when designing the study. Their experiences of being born into and growing up in the U.S. as racial minorities may be immensely different from those of transnational Chinese who later come to the U.S. from the Greater China Region. In addition, as a response to the first point, lower or working class, non-
English speaking, and even undocumented transnational Chinese are missing in my participants pool as well. Their unique experiences would add more layers to the sensemaking of transnational Chinese in the U.S., especially in terms of defying the “Model Minority” myth as transnational Chinese are not all able to speak English, receive U.S. American higher education, and live a decent middle class life in the U.S. Besides, the views of some ethnic minority members, who are considered to be separatists, were not included in my research. Living as political refugees, whose Chinese identity has been officially erased, their transnational experiences would likely be much more challenging compared to the more privileged experiences of those who participated in my study. Their identification, dis-identification, or counter-identification with Chinese-ness would add more complexities to our understandings of Chinese-ness.

Last but not the least, I have realized that when I discussed Hong Kong and Taiwan, I may have treated them as monolithic entities, although I did mention that both places in themselves are already very complex. For instance, Hong Kong, as an internationally known financial center, has a mixed migrated population from all over the world. Thus, seeing Hong Kong as a Chinese community returned from colonial rule is not adequately accurate. Identification with Chinese-ness, thus, makes little to zero sense to many who have no ties to China either culturally or biologically, for example off-springs of colonial era immigrants, manual workers from less developed countries from southeast Asia, and foreign business residents living in Hong Kong. Similarly, Taiwan, as a post-colony of Japan and the counterpart of the mainland, may have closer ties to Japan and the U.S. politically while being closer to mainland China economically and culturally. Its culture is highly influenced not only by China, but also by the West and Japan. Many Taiwanese may travel, do business, study, and even get
married to people from all over the world, and these three regions in particular. Their identification with Chinese-ness may thus be largely different from one another within the island, let alone those from mainland China and Hong Kong. Moreover, different political beliefs and aspirations regarding either unification or autonomy in both Hong Kong and Taiwan split the societies from within. Due to different ties and interests in and outside of Hong Kong and Taiwan, multiple forces based on different rationales within these two societies are contesting with one another as well with mainland authorities and Western powers. More in-depth studies of Chinese-ness in Hong Kong and Taiwan respectively would shed further light on these complexities.

**Future Directions and More Possibilities**

With the limitations taken into consideration for future research, there are a few other directions that studies of Chinese-ness in transnational contexts may be grounded upon. These directions may require, though, a redefining and extension of the concept of transnational Chinese. For example, as race is understood very differently in the Chinese context, how white Chinese, such as Russian, Tajik, Kazakh, Uyghur, and Tatar Chinese, identify with Chinese-ness could be a very intriguing topic to study as they are perceived to be racially more related to Russians, Tajik, Kazak, and middle-easterners while culturally to Chinese. This may be understood as another form of transnational identity experience. Their self-identification with Chinese-ness thus may add another layer to our understandings of Chinese-ness from another non-dominant perspective.

Secondly, due to the economic rise of China on the global stage in the past a few decades, many overseas born Chinese are starting to flow back to China. With a Chinese “look,” many of them do not speak fluent Mandarin Chinese, and their cultural knowledge about China and of
being Chinese may be vastly different from both local Chinese and transnational Chinese overseas. Thus, their experiences of living and working in China may be another interesting topic to pursue as this type of transnational experience comes with different challenges and benefits, which is different from what was explored in the current study.

Additionally, as many Chinese orphans are adopted by Western families, how they relate to China and Chinese as persons who have the Chinese “look” but not the cultural experiences in and knowledge about China can be another worthwhile transnational angle to study. Growing up as minorities with families of another racial background would be yet another identity dimension worth exploring.

Besides, international and interracial marriages are very common today. People with Chinese ancestry married to a foreign person or to another native Chinese person, or vice versa, may also experience different struggles and privileges. No matter where they live, in the West or in China, their transnational experience would offer further layers toward understanding Chinese-ness in relation to identity in today’s global world.

Moreover, China’s footsteps today have reached many developing countries through its Belt and Road Initiative, and Chinese companies and businesses have followed suit. Many Chinese either find opportunities in these countries or have their families there. Studies exploring their transnational experiences in non-Western overseas contexts would also be valuable to intercultural communication scholarship.

Writing this dissertation about transnational Chinese is like a long journey to learn and relearn my own in-between identities and transnational cultural location through both lenses of others and my own. It has immensely deepened my understandings of the ways identity experiences and culture have been intricately communicated through power operations
permeated in almost every aspect of our lives. Maybe only through talk about them, talk back to them, and deconstructing them can imbalanced power relations and social injustice be reminded and shaken that have long been imposed upon us.
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APPENDIX A

RESEARCH INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR TRANSNATIONAL CHINESE LIVING IN THE U.S.

Part 1

Pseudonym:_______
Major:________
Profession:_________
Ethnicity:_______
Years in U.S.:______
Legal Status:_______
Hometown:________
Current location:_________

Part 2

Q1. How do you make sense of your racial identity in the U.S.?
Q2. What do China and the U.S. mean to you respectively?
Q3. How do you identify yourself in China and in the U.S.?
Q4. How do you position yourself in relation to the U.S. before and after you came to the U.S.?
Q5. How do you position yourself in relation to China before and after you came to the U.S.?
Q6. What makes you (not) identify as Chinese?
Q7. What do(es) China and/or Chinese-ness mean to you after having transnational experiences?
Q8. How do you think about China’s renationalization of Hong Kong and/or unification with Taiwan?
Q9. How much is your life affected by the Sino-U.S. trade war?
Q10. How do you think about the trade war?
Q11. What have you seen that has remained/changed in/about China?
Q12. How do you envision your future with the U.S. and China?
APPENDIX B

COVER LETTER

Dear ________________:

My name is Tao Zhang. I am a Ph.D candidate at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale.

I am asking you to participate in my research study. The purpose of my study is to better understand Chinese-ness in a transnational context with more nuanced lived experiences.

Participation is voluntary. Participants must be 18 years old. If you choose to participate in the study, it will take approximately 45-60 minutes of your time (you are able to choose either to do a face-to-face or a written interview). You will be informed with the purpose and significance of my study, the voluntary nature of your role as a participant, the restoration and confidentiality of your interview data, as well as the benefits and possible risks of your involvement in this study. You’ll be receiving a compensation of a $10 Starbucks gift card for your participation.

All your responses will be kept confidential within reasonable limits. Only those directly involved with this project will have access to the data.

Questions about this study can be directed to me or to my supervising professor, Dr. Bardhan, Department of Communication Studies, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901. Phone (618) 453-1891. (SIU Mail Code: 6605)

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Name: Tao Zhang
Phone number: 781-290-7696
E-mail (optional): tao.zhang@siu.edu

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Research Compliance, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4344. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu
APPENDIX C

EMAIL REQUEST
(for SIU Participants)

From: Tao Zhang
Subject: Research Request

Dear SIU International Students/Scholars:

I am a Ph. D candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. I am currently conducting my dissertation research on decolonizing the understanding of Chinese-ness, which explores a more broad and nuanced understanding of Chinese-ness for transnational individuals living in the U.S., whose identity is not confined to certain specific geographic region, political beliefs, and/or national identification, etc.

You are contacted through SIU Center for International Education (CIE) because you are at least 18 years old.

Your participation is voluntary. You will be getting a small gratitude of a $10 Starbucks gift card for your participation.

Please click the survey below if interested. I’ll contact you to schedule the interview shortly after: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/9CQSG7G

Questions about this study can be directed to me via tao.zhang@siu.edu

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee (19264). Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Research Compliance, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4344. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu
APPENDIX D

EMAIL REQUEST

From: Tao Zhang
Subject: Research Request

Dear ________________:

I am a Ph.D candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

You were selected to participate in this study because you are at least 18 years old, and self-identify as related to China/Chinese either culturally, linguistically, nationally, or historically, etc. You will be able to choose either to do a face-to-face interview or a written interview at your convenience.

The interview will take 45 to 60 minutes to complete. All your responses will be kept confidential within reasonable limits. Only people directly involved with this project will have access to the interviews/surveys. You’ll be receiving a compensation of a $10 Starbucks gift card for your participation.

Your participation is of great significance to me. It is voluntary. You can opt out at any time during the process. Your choice will be fully understood and respected. Your opt-out will not eliminate you from gaining your benefit (the $10 Starbucks gift card).

Questions about this study can be directed to me or to my supervising professor, Dr. Bardhan, Department of Communication Studies, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901. Phone (618) 453-1891. (SIU mailcode: 6605)

If you do not respond to this survey or return the opt-out message, you will not be contacted again.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Name: Tao Zhang
Phone number: 781-290-7696
E-mail (optional): tao.zhang@siu.edu

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Research Compliance, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4344. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu
访谈请求
(INTERVIEW REQUEST IN SIMPLIFIED CHINESE)
您好，
我叫张韬，是SIU Communication Studies Dept.
的博士候选人。我目前正在做博士毕业论文，题目是关于旅居美国的海外华人身份认同的。出国前，由于历史、政治、经济、文化，以及情感等因素，我们各自对自己的“中国人/华人”身份有不同的理解（也许有语言、历史、地缘、政治上的认同或者不认同等等）。出国后，我们可能又都被视为“Chinese”，这同样让我们既有种族或文化上的认同感，又有政治或意识形态上的抗拒感。
正因为有了跨国生活的经历，我们有了对国内和国外两种文化的对照。相信我们对自己的种族、文化，以及“华人”身份都有了更新更深更复杂地理解。
鉴于此，我希望能通过与来自不同地区、不同民族背景、不同生活经历的您进行一次深度访谈。期待能听到您以不同的观点，从不同的立场和角度加深我对“Chineseness”这个种族、政治、文化、情感身份的理解。如果您愿意参与我的访谈，我将不胜感谢！
我的研究已经得到SIU HSC的许可(19264)。后续，我将给您发送所有相关文件！谢谢！
张韬
2020/04/07
tao.zhang@siu.edu
您也可以通过以下链接留下您的基本信息，我会稍后与您联络访谈事宜（网络/书面）！https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/9CQSG7G

訪談請求
(INTERVIEW REQUEST IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE)
您好，
我叫張韜，是SIU Communication Studies Dept.的博士候選人。我目前正在做博士畢業論文，題目是關於旅居美國的海外華人身份認同的。出國前，由於歷史、政治、經濟、文化，以及情感等因素，我們各自對自己的“中國人/華人”身份有不同的理解（也許有語言、歷史、地緣、政治上的認同或者不認同等等）。出國後，我們可能又都被視為“Chinese”，這同樣讓我們既有種族上的認同感，又有政治或意識形態上的抗拒感。
正因為有了跨國生活的經歷，我們有了對國內和國外兩種文化的對照。相信我們對自己的種族、文化，以及“華人”身份都有了更新更深更複雜地理解。
鑑於此，我希望能通過與來自不同地區、不同民族背景、不同生活經歷的您進行一次深度訪談。期待能聽到您以不同的觀點，從不同的立場和角度加深我對“Chineseness”這個種族、政治、文化、情感身份的理解。如果您願意參與我的訪談，我將不勝感謝！
我的研究已經得到的許可(19264)。後續，我將給您發送所有相關文件！謝謝！
張韜
2020/04/07
tao.zhang@siu.edu
您也可以通過以下連結留下您的基本信息，我會稍後與您聯絡訪談事宜（網絡/書面）！https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/9CQSG7G
Dear ______,

I’m Tao Zhang, a Ph. D candidate from the Communication Studies Department at SIU. I’m currently working on my dissertation. It is about the identity negotiation of the transnational Chinese living in the U.S. Prior to arriving in the U.S., we may have very different understandings of our “Chinese-ness” due to nuanced historical memories, politics, economics, cultures, and even emotional reasons. We may identify, dis-identify or counter-identify some of these identities related to China/Chinese. After coming to the U.S., however, we may all be perceived as “Chinese,” which reminds of our racial identity while leading to political and/or ideological denials.

It is because of the transnational experiences we share, we have at least two sets of different cultural references. From these experiences, I believe that a deeper, fresher, and more sophisticated understanding of our regarding our racial and cultural identities will emerge.

Thus, I’d like to invite you for an in-depth interview based on your own perspective voiced from a different region, ethnicity, or lived experiences. I’m looking forward to hearing how you make sense of “Chinese-ness(es)” in terms of race/ethnicity, politics, culture, emotion, and more. I’d greatly appreciate your participation!

My research has been approved by the SIU HSC (19624). I’ll forward you all the related, approved documents. Thank you!

You may also access the following link to leave some brief info. about yourself. I’ll contact you shortly.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/9CQSG7G

Sincerely,

Tao Zhang
tao.zhang@siu.edu
APPENDIX G

TRANSLATION VERIFICATION LETTER

This English translation is an accurate and honest reflection of its simplified & traditional Chinese interview requests. The Chinese interview request is going to be used for participant recruiting from my personal network, such as WeChat, personal email, or friends circles.

Tao Zhang

tao.zhang@siu.edu
781-290-8696
APPENDIX H

CONSENT FOR AUDIO TAPING
(Signatures of participants required)

&

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

I ( ), agree to participate in this research project conducted by (Tao Zhang), (Ph.D candidate at Communication Studies Department, SIUC). I confirm I am at least 18 years of age.

I understand the purpose of this study is to (decolonize the understanding of Chinese-ness). I understand my participation is strictly voluntary and may refuse to answer any question without penalty. I am also informed that my participation will last (one hour or so).

I understand that I can participate in the study either in a face-to-face or written interview, and my responses to the questions will be audio-taped (if face-to-face interview) or directed to the researcher upon completion (if written interview), and that these tapes/directed data will be transcribed/stored and kept for (at least 365 days) in a passcode-protected folder. Afterward, these tapes/secured data will be destroyed.

I understand questions or concerns about this study are to be directed to (Tao Zhang, 781-290-7696, tao.zhang@siu.edu) or her advisor (Nilanjana Bardhan, Communication Studies, 618-453-1891, bardhan@siu.edu).

I have read the information above and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity and know my responses will be tape recorded (if face-to-face interview)/my written responses should be directed to the researcher within 1-2 weeks upon receiving the questions (if written interview). I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me for the relevant information and phone numbers. I have been informed that I’ll be receiving a compensation of a $10 Starbucks gift card for my participation.

“I agree _____ I disagree _____ to have my responses recorded on audio tape/directed to the researcher.”

“I agree_____ I disagree _____ that (Tao Zhang) may quote me in her paper”

Participant signature:_______________ date:______________

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Research Compliance, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4344. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu
VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Tao Zhang

tao.zhang@siu.edu

Hainan University, China
Bachelor of Arts, English, July 1999

Yunnan University, China
Master of Arts, Communications, July 2007

Brandeis University, U.S.A.
Master of Arts, Comparative Humanities, May 2014

Special Honors and Awards:
John T Warren Excellence in Graduate Student Research/Creative Activity Award, Department of Communication Studies, Southern Illinois University (2021)
Graduate and Professional Student Council (GPSC) Research Award, Southern Illinois University (2020)
John T. Warren Memorial Scholarship, Department of Communication Studies, Southern Illinois University (2019)
John T. Warren Memorial Scholarship, Department of Communication Studies, Southern Illinois University (2018)

Dissertation Title:
THE NECESSITY AND POSSIBILITY OF DECOLONIZING THE UNDERSTANDING OF CHINESE-NESS

Major Professor: Dr. Nilanjana R. Bardhan

Publications:


Ha, L., Jiang, W., Bi, C., Zhang, R., Zhang, T., & Wen, X. (2016). How online usage of