The Construction of Bicultural Identity:

A Study of A Chinese School in Winnipeg

by

Haiying Su

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to examine the cultural identity construction of Chinese immigrants and their children in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It explores how organizations such as Chinese schools, which originated as language schools and have emerged as cultural sites and community centers for Chinese immigrants, have played a role in the construction of bicultural identity.

The fieldwork was conducted at a Chinese school located in Winnipeg, and the field data for this research project was collected through one-on-one interviews, life histories and participant observation.

Based on the field research, this study contributes some new understandings of Chinese immigrants' acculturation patterns, and suggests a new form of Chinese community that combine Chinese and Canadian elements. By examining one facet of bicultural experience, this study is a valid starting point for an examination of acculturation and enculturation process.

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And to my parents – this could not have happened without you. This is for you, with love and thanks.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

> *We as parents are providing something most valuable to our children through the heritage language schools. I am a firm believer that a sense of confidence regarding one's heritage can only be developed through the personal experience of the language itself. It is the language which provides the communication linkage to one's heritage and ethnic culture. It is the language which convenes the kinship feeling within an ethnic community. We are obligated to provide our children with some exposure to the language which is part of their legitimate heritage...The most important point, though, we must accept is the fact that to our children, the most suitable way for them to accept and enjoy the Chinese language classes is to teach the course in a way similar to all other classes they are undertaking during the weeklong school hours. Let the student have a good time, and let our children develop their own self-identity with comfort and confidence. (Pei 1988:18)*

In the 2001 Census, Canadians listed more than 200 ethnic groups in answering the question on ethnic ancestry, reflecting a varied, rich cultural mosaic as the nation started the new millennium (Statistics Canada, 2001). The People's Republic of China was the leading country of birth among individuals who immigrated to Canada in the 1990s. In 2001, the Chinese were the largest visible minority group, surpassing one million for the first time. A total of 1,029,400 individuals identified themselves as Chinese, up from

860,100 in 1996 (see Table 1-1). They accounted for 3.7% of the total national population and 26% of the visible minority population (see Table 1-2).

At present, Winnipeg, a multicultural city on the Canadian prairies, has attracted a sizable Chinese population estimated to number over 10,890 (Statistics Canada, 2001). Unlike the early Chinese immigrants who grouped themselves in Chinatowns, many post-1980 immigrants have settled by mixing with other ethnic groups. Many are professionals, competent in English and moving toward assimilation in the Canadian mainstream culture. These changes have affected the acculturation patterns, especially the identity development of the more recent Chinese immigrants and their children.

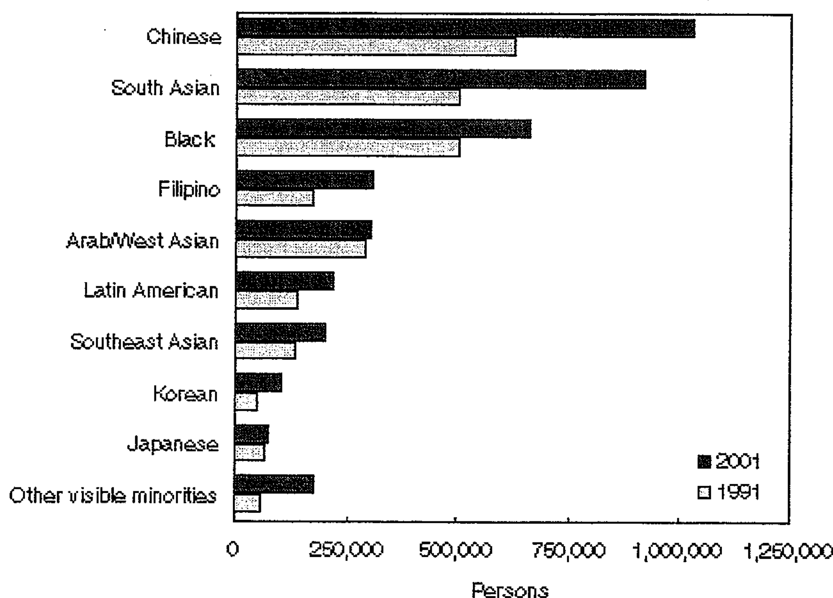
There are many ethnic institutions designed to assist immigrants in the transition from the old country to the new one. "If Chinatown was formed as an escape from a hostile society, but accidentally served to preserve traditional Chinese culture, the emergence of Chinese schools is a more conscious effort of preserving and carrying on Chinese cultural values" (Lu 2001:215). Leaving the native country behind makes these immigrants cherish more about their cultural traditions and practices. As Tanno and Gonzalez (1998) postulate, symbolic interaction and language play a key role in the development and maintenance of cultural identity. Language is a perceptible identity marker that maintains the boundary between "Us" and "Other."

The purpose of this research is to examine the cultural identity construction of Chinese immigrants and their children in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It explores how organizations such as Chinese schools, which originated as language schools and have emerged as cultural sites and community centers for Chinese immigrants, have played a role in the construction of bicultural identity. Through this research, I seek to address

issues such as representations of ethnicity and nationality in the context of multiculturalism in Canada, the role of language in the cultural identity crafting, and interactions between first-generation Chinese immigrants and their children who are Canadian-born in the process of cultural identity constructing.

In particular, this study tries to answer the following research questions: (1) what is the role and function of the Chinese school in the process of cultural identity construction for Chinese immigrants; how the first-generation parents and their second-generation Canadian-born children participate in the process? (2) What discursive practices, including curriculum, does the Chinese school engage in that facilitate the construction of a bicultural identity for Chinese-Canadian children? The answers to these questions were generated through ethnographic research involving participant observation, and interviews at a Chinese school located in Winnipeg.

Table 1-1: Visible minority groups, Canada, 1991 and 2001



Source: 2001 Census

Table 1-2: Top 10 ethnic origins [1], based on total responses, Canada, 2001 and 1996

2001			1996		
	Number	**%**		**Number**	**%**
Total population	**29,639,030**	**100.0**	**Total population**	**28,528,125**	**100.0**
Canadian	11,682,680	39.4	Canadian	8,806,275	30.9
English	5,978,875	20.2	English	6,832,095	23.9
French	4,668,410	15.8	French	5,597,845	19.6
Scottish	4,157,215	14.0	Scottish	4,260,840	14.9
Irish	3,822,660	12.9	Irish	3,767,610	13.2
German	2,742,765	9.3	German	2,757,140	9.7
Italian	1,270,369	4.3	Italian	1,207,475	4.2
Chinese	***1,094,700***	***3.7***	Ukrainian	1,026,475	3.6
Ukrainian	1,071,055	3.6	***Chinese***	***921,585***	***3.2***
North American Indian	1,000,890	3.4	Dutch (Netherlands)	916,215	3.2
(1) Table shows total responses. Because some respondents reported more than one ethnic origin, the sum is greater than the total population or 100%.					

Source: 2001 Census.

1.1 Organization of the thesis

In the following chapters, the previous studies on cultural and bicultural identity will be addressed first, followed by an overview of related studies on issues about language as a key marker of cultural identity in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 is a discussion of methodology. It explains the choices of qualitative research method, how these choices have been applied here and the procedure of the research conducted. As well I examine how I myself, as the researcher, contribute both an insider and an outsider view in conducting the fieldwork and in interpreting the interview data.

In Chapter 4, a brief social and historical background of the Chinese community in Winnipeg will be introduced, including changing policies in the early community, the Chinese community since the 1980s, and subdivisions within the community. This is followed by Chapter 5, in which I will first introduce the history of Chinese schools in Winnipeg within an overall picture with changing policies as the background. Then the history of the specific Chinese school studied will be introduced, as well as its present administrative system, its relationships with the local Winnipeg community, and its relationships with other Chinese communities in Canada.

After the above two background chapters, which were based on library research and archival and documentary material collections, in Chapter 6, a collective analysis about the results of the fieldwork will be presented. Because of their different roles and degrees of participation in this Chinese school, the first generation immigrants were divided into two groups: parents and teachers. The results of the interview data are gathered in three parts: parents, teachers and students. The second part of this chapter will present how the two immigrant generations define China and Canada together with their words.

Chapter 7 will outline analysis and discussion of the field data, and address a series of themes: how can language be presented as the medium of culture, and the mark of identity? How does the Chinese school exist as a form of social organization in the Chinese community, and functions as a Chinese cultural site, while providing the place and space for identity construction for the first generation Chinese immigrant to adopt local Canadian culture and society? At the same time, how does it permit the second generation Canadian-born children to keep their Chinese heritage? The thesis explores

how it articulates the process of bicultural identity formation, and the dynamics of the acculturation process.

Chapter 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical theorists conceptualize the phenomenon of biculturalism and development of a bicultural identity within a context of continuous struggle against cultural oppression and imposed pressures to assimilate into the dominant culture. The formation of bicultural identity among members of subordinate groups is significantly affected by theoretical perspectives of bicultural reorganization, historical experiences of marginalization, and relationships of power within the society (Marino Weisman 2001).

2.1 Defining bi/cultural identity and its re/construction

Cultural identity has been defined as "identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules for conduct" (Collier and Thomas 1998:113). Collier and Thomas (1998) suggested that cultural identity is dynamic and created through communication and symbolic interaction. In their view, a person can have multiple identities; however, a particular cultural identity may become salient in a given encounter. Ting-Toomey (1993) posits that the salience of one's identity is enacted and negotiated through the process of communication. In her words, "effective identity negotiation refers to the smooth coordination between interactants concerning salient identity issues, and the process of engaging the responsive identity conformation and positive identity enhancement" (Ting-Toomey 1993:73).

The construction and negotiation of cultural/ethnic identity is closely linked to the acculturation process in the case of immigrants or ethnic groups. According to Berry (1997), for individuals in pluralist societies, there are two major issues relating to acculturation strategies, namely cultural maintenance and contact and participation. Four acculturation strategies result as a consequence of the resolution of these issues. When individuals seek contact and participation with the dominant group without maintenance of their own cultural identity, the assimilation strategy is adopted. In the case of individuals who maintain their own cultural identity, with little contact and participation with the dominant group, the separation strategy is adopted. For individuals who seek to maintain both their own cultural identity and contact and participation with the dominant group, the integration strategy is adopted. Finally, the marginalization strategy is adopted by individuals who have little opportunity or interest in cultural maintenance, nor any contact and participation with the dominant group.

Though integration has generally been found to be predictive of positive psychological adaptation (Berry & Sam 1997; Sue & Sue 1990), Berry and Sam argue that for children and adolescents, integration is a difficult option if there is little parental support for this acculturation strategy (Leung 2001).When an immigrant or ethnic group separates itself from the rest of the society, its cultural/ethnic identity may become the most salient. Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) conceptualized this to refer to group members who maintain their cultural or ethnic identity by demonstrating loyalty to their language.

Immigrants who lack competence in the language of their new country and occupational skills may separate themselves from the larger society and seek support and

help from their own cultural and social group. This was exemplified before the 1980s by the many Chinese immigrants who choose to work and live in Chinatowns throughout their entire lives. Their cultural identity was strictly Chinese.

In response to the diverse ethnic groups and influx of immigrants from various cultures, scholars have proposed different models of acculturation. The melting pot model assumes that all immigrant groups will eventually sacrifice their communal identity and blend into the dominant culture, and this model has been considered an analysis of the American experience; whereas the cultural pluralism model postulates the preservation of the immigrant's ancestral culture within the context of mainstream society, a model which better fits the Canadian context (Hughes and Kallen 1974).

Critical scholars look at cultural identity formation in historical and socio-economic contexts as well as in power relations. The dominant groups define the identities of the subordinate groups through discursive practices and media representations. Campbell (2000) critiques what she sees as the "general agreement" that "construction of individual cultural identity is a process of acceptance of the cultural norms, beliefs, attitudes and values of one cultural group rather than another" (2000:31). From her point of view, however, this definition does not include the possibility that individuals may identify with more than one cultural group, may change their cultural identity in new cultural contexts, or may have developed the ability to move between different cultural contexts without losing their sense of individual identity. National identity can coexist with a separate and distinct cultural identity which means that: "It is possible to wear the baggage of civic symbols of cultural identity such as citizenship, while at the same time identifying with one or more specific cultural groups within the

nation" (Gunew 1998: 27). These cultural identities have no need to be "mutually exclusive," but may be "cumulative layers," where the immediate cultural context determines which layer is relevant at any particular time (Smith 1992).

For Hutnik (1986), cultural identity does not need to be a "singular, fixed, inflexible given" but can be constituted of multiple sub-identities. Based on this, his study concludes that "the individual's sense of who he/she is or is not in terms of his/her group membership does not necessarily have implications for how he/she will behave" (Hutnik 1986:164). Cases in which one is dissociative in one's cultural identity and highly acculturative in one's behaviour suggest that ethnic identity in the second generation may in fact become functionally autonomous. This "partial autonomy of cultural identity" suggests an explanation for the failure of the United States' melting-pot theory from the early part of this century. According to Hutnik (1986), it was a common observance that cultural identity was undergoing continual change, especially as the second and third generations took over responsibility for group functioning. Therefore, the ethnic boundary defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses.

Phinney and Devich-Navarro (1997) stated that members of ethnic minority groups within a society are exposed to two cultures, their ethnic culture and the culture of the larger society. They examined adolescents engaged in the process of identity formation while faced with differing demands and possible conflicts among alternative cultural frames of reference, and with the reality of minority status and discrimination.

They further explored the situation of immigrants insofar as it was assumed that, to deal with bicultural pressures, they either had to reject the mainstream and remain embedded within the ethnic culture, or else assimilate into the mainstream society and

reject the ethnic culture. Phinney and Devich-Navarro (1997) summarized two independent dimensions: "retention of one's cultural traditions; and, establishment and maintenance of relationships with the larger society" (1997:3). Those who retain the traditions and values of their culture of origin and also develop and maintain identification with the larger society are said to be integrated. Integrated individuals who identify with and participate in both cultures can be called bicultural according to varied conceptualizations of that state.

Marino Weisman (2001) pointed out that "a strong bicultural identity encompasses a consciousness of social forces that perpetuate the marginalization of subordinate groups and a resistance to these forces of domination" (2001:224). Hall (1990) linked development of cultural identity with diaspora characterized by cultural diversity, fluidity, and transformation that many immigrant groups have experienced, and his ideas shed light on viewing identity as fluid, multiple, and ever changing.

Some case studies show that the person who does not belong to the cultural mainstream is obviously disadvantaged. Based on his study of non-mainstream children, Baker (1996) suggested that children from a bicultural background suffer from "home/school disarticulation," where the norms, values, attitudes and beliefs of the family unit differ from those of the educational system, thereby alienating the child and the child's family from the education system. In such a case, peer pressure to conform to cultural norms at school can be just as great as parental pressure to conform to cultural norms at home. For these children, there is no choice but moving from one cultural context to another, and cultural adaptability becomes one of the essential survival skills.

However, some authors have offered accounts of how they went through an identity crisis and then came to terms with their Asian-Canadian identity through additive acculturation experiences. Their bilingual competence and bicultural orientation helped them in academic performance as well as occupational success (Lu 2001; Schneider and Lee 1990).

As expressing both disadvantage and benefit, the concept of "bicultural" has been discussed and examined by these recent theorists who have suggested that people from bicultural backgrounds have the ability to cross cultural barriers or boundaries from one side to the other without losing their sense of cultural identity. Under the pressure of the dominant culture, such as the education system or peer groups, assimilation to the mainstream culture is an obvious way to understand "survival strategy."

The majority of studies on cultural identity construction have focused on the influence of assimilation or acculturation by dominant mainstream culture. It is a one-sided approach though if we ignore the other side of struggle, which is how the home/native culture resists or reinforces the construction or reconstruction of ethnic identity. Whether the home cultural identity is natural or automatic, the process of identity construction can explain and understand the similarity and differences of bicultural identity as a result of negotiations. This is especially true in showing how the disadvantaged identity, in terms of power relationship, is struggling or has struggled to survive.

2.2 Ethnic language—the key marker

Basing his study in a Canadian context, De Vries (1990) points out those studies of ethnicity tend to ignore issues of language, and studies of linguistic pluralism generally fail to consider issues relating to ethnicity. He tried to link the two by discussing various 'markers' of ethnicity, such as language, religion, national origin, and "race." De Vries' main point is that "the loss of an ethnic 'marker' inevitably leads to the loss of ethnicity." His main argument focuses on language as a "marker" of ethnic groups: "the language shift is an indication of the weakening and eventual demise of ethnicity" (1990:231).

De Vries agrees with Weinreich (1953) who defined "loss of language" as "language shift," meaning "the change in the habitual use of one language to that of another." Language shift (in Canadian society) is a good indicator of a person's assimilation into Canadian society. The corollary to this may be why ethnic language schools exist so widely throughout Canada: as a means of resistance to that assimilation. In fact, De Vries (1990) suggested that "language maintenance" is a necessary condition for the maintenance of ethnicity and survival of the ethnic group—though not a sufficient condition. Based on census statistics from 1941 to 1987, De Vries (1990) further suggested that ethnic identity and language maintenance is strongly linked to nativity (kinship). Identification with a specific ethnic group weakens with each generation and is associated with a declining knowledge of the ethnic language.

De Vries was not alone, Heller agreed that "shared language is basic to shared identity, but more than that, identity rests on shared ways of using language that reflect common patterns of thinking and behaving, or shared culture" (1987:181). Heller's conclusion on the relationship between language and the construction of ethnicity was

that, "Language can be used not only to reaffirm background knowledge, but to create it, and on the basis of new background knowledge to define new conventions of behaviour" (1987:186). In her study, Heller emphasized the importance of language as a means of establishing the social ties and the participation in social activities that underlie entry to a social network.

As another contributor to the study of the relationship between language and identity, Peter Li defines minority language identity as "the adoption of a nonofficial language as the mother tongue or home language" (2001:137). He agrees that those who adopt a non-official language as the mother tongue or home language would necessarily have a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic group. Li emphasized that the retention of a minority language as mother tongue or home language constitutes an added component in the construction of ethnic minority identity, and that people who retain such a mother tongue or home language have a stronger linguistic capacity to link themselves with their ethnic community than others who do not retain such language (Li 2001).

Li rightly pointed out that the adoption of a minority language as mother tongue or home language represents an ethnic endowment or an ethnic language choice (respectively) and can be described as a phenomenon of minority language identity (Li 2001:137). However, in practice, the "adoption" and maintenance of a minority language seems to be an ongoing struggle for the Canadian-born. Min, Pyong Gap and Rose Kim describe the phenomena: "The 1.5- and second-generation…were raised in homes where their parents spoke their native language, ate their native food, and practiced their native customs. Yet, outside the home, their culture was marginal and largely invisible" (2000:746).

In fact, the main "officially" organized regular ethnic language teaching-learning site is the Chinese school. In her study "The Maintenance of Chinese Language in Winnipeg," Xiao (1998) states, "While there are many Chinese organizations in Winnipeg, overt attempts at Chinese language maintenance occur mainly through the efforts of community-run Chinese schools" (1998:91). Even though operated independently of each other, these schools share the ideology of preserving and promoting Chinese language and culture among young Chinese in Canada.

Xiao argues that the function of the Chinese language schools is more than language maintenance; the students in the Chinese schools generally have a positive attitude towards their own ethnic group, are able to make friends within their own ethnic group, and are willing to participate in ethnic group activities (Xiao 1998). She further suggests that the very existence of these schools provides a meeting ground for young Chinese who otherwise would be totally immersed in the larger society outside their home. The school therefore reinforces group identity. In Chinese schools, the young students are able to meet others of their own ethnic background and gain exposure to the cultural values transmitted by the schools.

Therefore, Xiao (1998) suggests that language teaching in Chinese schools is only a limited aspect of maintaining Chinese language. Meanwhile, the community's efforts toward language maintenance make an important contribution to cultural identity. Xiao believes, "When language teaching inside the Chinese schools is reinforced by language use outside and supported by both the community and the larger Canadian society, the efforts of the Chinese schools and of the Chinese community in language maintenance are most fruitful" (1998: 91).

Xiao (1998) well demonstrates the relationship between minority language and cultural identity. However, I would challenge Xiao's notion of "maintaining cultural identity" rather than of "re/constructing," because the content of cultural identity is not rigid and unchangeable. Instead, it is invented or re/constructed and undergoes constant transformation (Winland 1995).

It must be noted that one cannot study immigration and acculturation patterns in isolation from historical, social, political, economic, and racial contexts in Canada and the world, nor can one understand the topic without examining the individual and group background and experiences of migration as influenced by these contexts. As Wong (1998) summarizes well, "We must use this framework to examine identity as a process, and an effect of discourses about racial and ethnic formation that stretches across continents, history, generations, governments, and peoples. Using the metaphors of diasporas and imagined communities, we can examine the discourses that we use or are exposed to that both help us and hinder us in shaping notions of community"(Wong 1998:133). The early Chinese immigrants were restricted in their identity development and deprived of their voices, resulting in the limited notions and functions of Chinatowns. The new immigrants put emphasis on cultural integration, promote immigrants' participation in the host country as well as encourage preserving and honouring their own cultural roots. Moreover, they are more globally oriented, able to create their own discourses and articulate their own experiences, leading to the bicultural identity development of themselves and their children, and in so doing, expanding the notions and functions of communities.

The complicated process of negotiation and construction of bicultural identity is related to variable degrees of involvement of factors such as language, ethnicity, nationality, acculturation, social organization, and socialization. In the following pages I will discuss these factors with an ethnographical, as well as a theoretical focus.

Chapter 3

RESEARCH PROCEDURE AND METHODS

In agreement with Coffey (1999) that the ethnographic self is the outcome of complex negotiations, this chapter will first explore how I myself, as a researcher, am positioned both as an insider and an outsider in conducting the fieldwork and in interpreting the interview data. This is followed by a discussion of methodology, explaining the choices of qualitative research methods and how they have been applied in this research.

3.1 Position in the Field

I first came to know about this school because of a project for the applied anthropology class in the autumn of 2001. A former teacher at the school introduced me to the principal of this Chinese school. After a talk on the phone, the principal invited me to the school for a meeting. I introduced myself and my research, and I was allowed to conduct the course project there; meanwhile, the principal invited me to volunteer as a secretary of the school board at the same time. I accepted the invitation to express my appreciation. That project was finished successfully before the end of the Chinese school's term that year. After handing in a copy of the project report to this school, I decided to keep volunteering there, and later substituted in a couple of classes for the adult class till the summer vacation. There were some teachers' gatherings during that summer, and I was invited to become one of the teachers. In late August 2002, I received a letter from the principal, who invited me to sign on as a regular teacher of this school.