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Global Communities of Difference: Chinese Identity in an Age of Anti-Asian Racism and #StopAsianHate

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Abstract

Covid-19, western Sinophobia and geopolitics are raising new questions about Chinese cultural identity, which has become an increasingly contentious terrain at the current historical moment. Stuart Hall's work provides a way to think beyond racial, cultural and state impositions of cultural identity through ideas of self-positioning, difference and hybridity. Chinese cultural identity as difference and hybridity, however, faces real world challenges in spaces of contested identity such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, and from Sinophobia.

Key words: Chinese cultural identity, Sinophobia, Stuart Hall, Covid-19, difference, hybridity

Chinese identity is marked by difference. It is linked to racial and ethnic questions, as well as political, historical and geographical environments (Chen, 2006: 6). Chinese identity is increasingly global, encompassing diverse communities across the world and online.
The Covid-19 pandemic raises new questions about Chinese identity as it is refracted in western countries through old racial demarcations of Sinophobia. The pandemic has thrown national and geographical boundaries into new relief, with borders, travel restrictions and access to vaccines determined primarily by nation states and global-power blocks, then often equated with identity groupings. How might Chinese identity be thought beyond racial, ethnic and state boundaries, in order to encompass the diverse communities that form it? As western voices, how can we contribute to global communities of difference to combat anti-Chinese and anti-Asian hate?

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall offers a model for thinking of cultural identity as global communities of difference. In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall argues that cultural identity is not only a matter a "being" but of "becoming" (Hall, 1994: 225). While Hall's idea of cultural identity emerged from the diasporic Afro-Caribbean experience, contemporary Chinese and global identity can be thought productively as ontologically diasporic, as constituting narratives of difference. The current historical conjuncture constitutes a crisis point inflected by the contours of global neoliberalism, including spatial displacement, economic financial abstraction, disruptive virtual technologies and impending climate catastrophe. Hall's idea of identities which are "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall, 1994: 235) offers one model for thinking about identity that exceeds racial, cultural and state divisions.

Hall outlines that cultural identity can be viewed from different perspectives. In a first perspective, cultural identity appears as a sort of "one true self," grounded in common history and ancestry and "shared cultural codes" (Hall, 1994: 223). While this perspective is premised on what is shared or common, it can lead to the imposition of essentialist and hegemonic

identity. In the West, the "one true self" conception of identity easily lapses into racial designations of the Chinese/Asian other and Sinophobia. The Chinese government meanwhile is seeking to impose a hegemonic conception of Chinese identity, based upon a claimed common history and ancestry, on Hong Kong, Taiwan, and (to some extent) Chinese overseas communities.

In a second perspective, Hall demarcates cultural identity as a dynamic that encompasses "similarities" but importantly "deep and significant differences" and "discontinuities" (Hall, 1994: 225). Identity in this perspective is "not an essence but a *positioning*" (Hall, 1994: 226). This second perspective allows more individual and collective agency, as identity is shaped through narratives of difference, which transcend essentialising cultural identity in destructive notions of race and nation. Hall suggests hybridity and pan-identity as alternatives to hegemonic and essentialist identities (Hall, 1994: 235).

Hall's model of cultural identity as difference and hybridity offers a way to challenge perceived homogenous and hegemonic Chinese identity, opening a way to think about cultural identity in a broader context of communities of difference. Such a project avoids the association of Chinese identity with the mainland or Chinese state, surpassing racial and national categorisation. This offers a starting point for opening up a radical egalitarian conception of identity that embraces common history and ancestry, while seeking to recognise identity as a sphere of difference, including gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class and so on. This dynamic creates the possibility of what I will call 'voluntary communities of difference', and for the narration and self-positioning of cultural identity in online spaces.

Although Hall's work preceded the advent of social media, his diasporic conception of identity translates well to a world conditioned by the prevalence of virtual technologies. In its best form, social media offers a medium for presence-forming, where we may position ourselves in voluntary communities. Online voluntary communities of difference offer spaces and linguistic operations through which we may position ourselves, recognising difference as common becoming. Such communities, pan-Chinese or pan-Asian for example, allow reimagining cultural identity beyond designations determined by economic, state and military competition. These voluntary communities can be distinguished from the often involuntary communities of race and state, through which the parameters of identity are normally conceived.

While voluntary communities of difference offer a model of identity, there are challenges in the encounter with real world political and state actors wielding cultural identity as a weapon. The hope for a pan-African identity, for example, has been thwarted by real world divisions of conflicting religious, tribal, ethnic and linguistic groupings, both on the continent of Africa and in the African diaspora. A hybrid or pan-Chinese/pan-Asian identity faces similar challenges from both western Sinophobia and the Chinese state. The racialising of the Chinese/Asian other in western countries forces an involuntary designation of identity on people. Likewise, the Chinese government's assertion of a hegemonic "Chinese" identity and rule in Hong Kong and Taiwan seeks to impose an identity on the peoples that live in those spaces. How does diasporic and hybrid identity react when it runs into powerful and dominant states wielding cultural identity as a weapon? How do ideas of a pan-Chinese/pan-Asian cultural identity function in relation to two problematic areas of Chinese identity and real political flashpoints, namely Hong Kong and Taiwan? How can western voices join the communities of difference to prevent real world military, economic and state competition?

Hong Kong and Taiwanese identity are often positioned by geographical, historical and narrative difference to mainland China. At the same time, temporal and generational divides in

both Hong Kong and Taiwan mean that the desire for a distinct identity is by no means homogeneous. Ackbar Abbas famously identified the emergence of a Hong Kong cultural identity in the 1980s and 1990s as a "first-line defense against total political absorption" by China (Abbas, 1997: 142). Hong Kong's cultural identity was conceived by Abbas as hybrid, hyphenated and anticipatory, while also fundamentally precarious (Abbas, 1997). Hong Kongers' apparent desire for a distinct cultural identity poses a challenge to China's desire to absorb the territory under its jurisdiction and to impose a hegemonic Chinese identity. This dynamic broke out into open conflict in mid-2019 following the Anti-Extradition Law Movement and, for the present, the possibility of a distinct Hong Kong identity has been suppressed by China's state violence, arrests and legal repression.

Taiwanese identity is also often hybrid as "few people share a common national identity in Taiwan because of its peculiar history" (Wang, 2014: 35). Taiwan's "peculiar history" involves the mix of indigenous, local and Chinese populations, a legacy of Japanese colonialism and Guomindang rule, as well as a more recent democratic legacy that positions Taiwan as different from the Chinese mainland. Since 1991, people living in Taiwan have identified themselves increasingly as "Taiwanese," rather than as "Chinese," or pan-Taiwanese/Chinese (Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, 2021). This new Taiwanese identity has embraced the linguistic and ethnic diversity of the common space of the island of Taiwan (Yueh, 2020). The desire for a distinct "Taiwanese" identity, however, faces challenges from Taiwan's geo-political situation and the very real threat of military aggression from China.

In western countries, the rise of Sinophobia and xenophobia towards Chinese and Asian communities following the Covid-19 pandemic imposes involuntary identity along racial lines. Sinophobia is also increasingly wielded by western state-actors to counter China's growing economic and military power. The (re)emergence of Sinophobia and anti-Asian hate means that it is imperative for western voices to proffer solidarity against racial conceptions of identity. Such a moment of crisis as the current historical conjuncture should lead us to ask questions about our own identity, how we position ourselves as global citizens and how we assert that there is only one identity, that of the communities of difference who compose the global body politic. Such a notion of identity leads to the question of wider global justice and how we may face collectively the challenges of our world, questions that were central to Hall's conception of cultural identity as difference.

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