



Photo by Miranda Zhang

“Identity Dilemma”

Struggles between Ethnicity and Nationality in
Second-Generation Asian Immigrant Teens

IVY GATE International:

Sera Wang, Wenrui Li, Yuxi Zhu, Jiaming Zhang, Yaruo Tang, Weiyu Yan, Meixi Shen, Zihan Yu

Rachel Liu, a 16-year-old second-generation immigrant teen from Atlanta, Georgia, considers both ethnicity and nationality essential when asked how these two things shape her identity.

“Both parts make me who I am today. I feel like my ethnicity as a Chinese person has shaped who I am around my parents and at home, while nationality has shaped other aspects of my life such as my hobbies, my interests and my future aspirations,” she said.

Rachel is an American citizen who attends a private school in the U.S. To her, embracing both ethnicity and nationality as part of her identity is not a conflict, though it was not always this way.

Even as a child, Rachel knew that her family norms were not the same as her peers and that it was because she was Chinese, which made her want to change.

“I’ve always wanted to fit in my school more because there were virtually no Asians in the entire school,” she said.

Rachel’s case is not unique.

Background Research

Second-generation immigrants are the descendants of citizens who immigrated to a foreign country and acquired the nationality of that country. Even though nationality and ethnicity are not the only factors that constitute the identity of second-generation immigrants, both factors are significant components.

In a 2014 study, *First and Second-Generation Immigrants--Statistics on Main Characteristics*, from Eurostat, second-generation immigrants represented 6.1 percent of the total EU population. In the U.S., second-generation immigrants reached 19.7 million. Although there are no estimates of second-generation immigrants globally, we can only expect their numbers to

rise along with the current 244 million immigrants living world-wide, and with it, an increase in identity struggles.

According to a 2013 study, *Second-Generation Americans*, from the Pew Research Center, out of 19.7 million second-generation immigrants in the U.S., second-generation Asian immigrants are twice as likely to identify as the “typical American” compared to first-generation immigrants, but only 27 percent of Asians merely call themselves “American”, signifying that a notable portion of second-generation Asian immigrants still value their ancestral roots. However, Asian second-generation immigrants also show a significant imbalance between their heritage and nationality as almost all are proficient English speakers, but solely 40 percent of Asians are eloquent in their parents’ native tongue.

The Survey

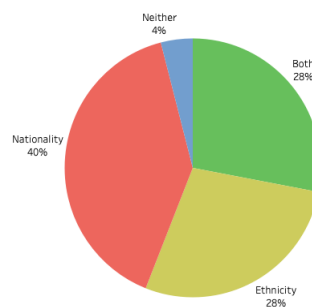
To substantiate whether or not second-generations feel at loose ends with their ethnicity, our team surveyed 27 second-generation immigrants from the U.S. and U.K. via the internet regarding perceptions of identity and found that they are divided on how they view their nationality and ethnicity.

The data collected reveals a correlation between what people prefer to respond as their “origin”(ethnicity/nationality) and which is more important to them. According to our survey, while most people prefer being referred to as “from the country of nationality,” only 40% of the respondents consider nationality to be more important than their ethnicity, around 28% answered ethnicity and approximately 32% of participants thought that both/neither was important. Nevertheless, this finding suggests that although second-generation Asian immigrants may still value their ethnicity as part of their identity.

Similarly, the participants’ responses diverged when being asked if nationality and ethnicity pose an internal conflict—around half admitted that such conflict exists and the other half responded “no”. When asked to briefly explain why, participants who responded “no”

generally reported being in inclusive communities and participants who answered “yes” or “sometimes” stated that values of their ethnicity did not align with ones of their nationality along with being in predominantly white communities, implying that the conflicts second-generation Asian immigrants encounter mainly depends on the practices of the family and the acceptance of the community.

Ethnicity and nationality, which one is more important to you?
YOC 2nd Gen. Survey, 2019



Even though the respondents were divided on how nationality and ethnicity make up their identity, most of the respondents considered heritage as a powerful factor in their lives. Our survey unveils that approximately 90% of our subjects reported that their families have required them to learn about their cultures. However, most respondents also reported at least one instance of resistance towards their culture as a result.

Bias and Cultural Practice

Rachel has experienced some frustration with both cultural biases from peers and the cultural practices of her parents.

Aside from stereotypical questions like “do you eat dogs” or “where are you *really* from,” Rachel has felt unfair pressure from her community to act in a certain way. She finds a lose-lose situation even in sometimes considered “positive” stereotypes among Asians, such as Asians being naturally good at math, which undermines hard work and exemplifies failure.

“There’s also this unrealistic standard that Asian people go to the best colleges and get the best grades[especially in STEM subjects],” she adds, “but that is very limiting to what Asians can do, and when you're young, and people project these notions on to you, you begin to think this is all your future can hold.”

Rachel recalls a time in her childhood when she brought noodles and dumplings for lunch, wishing to bring a sandwich instead, and was sent to “Chinese School” on Sundays, which she eventually quit. But she now comes to value her culture as she becomes older.

“Even if I don’t speak Chinese or mention any Chinese customs when I’m interacting with people of other cultures, these customs and traditions have shaped my character,” she said.

The Other End of the Spectrum

“Things are not the same as they were in our parents’ years,” said Helen Chen, a Californian girl living in the Bay Area, who believes Asian stereotypes are no longer realities that her generation must face.

When being asked about if her parents adopt the typical helicopter-parenting methods, Chen replies with a firm “no.”

Chen goes to a high school made of mostly Chinese Americans like her. She has a passionate interest in chemistry, plays the viola and plays ultimate Frisbee for her school’s team.

“My parents don’t really care what I do, as long as I’m happy,” she shrugs. “There are definitely some parents that are still obsessed with paving their children’s ways. But they are definitely the tiny portion on any pie chart.”

When learning about the tense education competition in China, she exclaimed, “That is crazy!” In her sense, no child should be forced to study at the price of their joy solely to get into a prestigious school.

Through the interview, Chen took the conversation in a new direction. She mentioned how most of her friends' parents are of the Christian religion, proposing the possibility that their first-generation-immigrant parents learned about American culture and adopted the country's values through religion.

Her idea is validated by Yi-Hsuan Chelsea Kuo in her paper, *Identify Formation in Chinese Christian Churches in the United States*, in which Kuo mentions that “more than one-third of Chinese/Chinese Americans in the United States today are Christians.” By comparison, only three percent of the population in China is Christian-affiliated.

Chen believes that it is the societal differences between the two countries that sets them apart, rather than the culture. “I still eat dumplings and zongzis, dress in red during Chinese New Year and study Mandarin, but there’s no way that I need to study twelve hours a day. It’s just not the case.”



Different Paths

Whatever the situation may be, second-generation immigrants experience ethnicity and nationality and reach their identity in different ways; the reasons for confusion or lack thereof depends on their individual situations. This means that facilitating conversations between cultures and abolishing stereotypes becomes more important than ever, as so communities can learn to understand that there is a spectrum of personalities even inside a collective culture.

Tiziana Ratcheva, a Bulgarian second-generation immigrant from Germany who has written about her experiences growing up and feeling foreign to both countries, describes it as, “starting with realizing something was slightly different, and then feeling like I wanted to regain control over what that was and how I feel about it... I cannot identify with everyone that I’m talking to who has the same history, but has come to a different conclusion,” and believes “there is a power in not being something particular, but it sometimes comes with a lot of pain.”

When asked how he experiences identity, one of our survey respondents writes, “Chinese traditions aren't the same as American’s, so I have to learn to change between the two at times or choose the ones important to me.”

“There are lots of Asian Americans in existence, hence the existence of a culture that accommodates people with my nationality and ethnicity,” writes another.

With a variety of scenarios, people may find themselves complacent with where they stand, while some still stand uncertain.

Even Rachel says: “I may still not have figured it out how these two things make up my identity, but I'm on the road to discover.”