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Subethnic interpersonal dynamic in diasporic community: a study on Chinese immigrants in Vancouver

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ABSTRACT

Ethnicity is a social construct that can be conceptualised as a social classification delineating certain boundaries between an ethnic group and the dominant group. Members of an ethnic group are assumed to share similar cultural characteristics and to be homogenous among themselves. Many studies in ethnic organisations have indicated that subethnicity also exists within an ethnic group, but research on subethnicity is scant. Based on the findings of an exploratory study conducted in Vancouver, Canada, we examined how, at an interpersonal level, place of origin, language, mutual bias and discrimination and transnational politics divide the Chinese diasporic community subethnically. Meanwhile, being Chinese in the Canadian context and willingness to break the subethnic boundaries are noted as counterforces to the subethnic divide. We contend that interpersonal interaction is an imperative dimension for the understanding of the shaping of boundary between different subethnic groups.

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Introduction

As a social classification used to distinguish one group from the other, ethnicity can be traced back to early Greek civilisation.¹ People are placed into a particular ethnic group largely based on some shared characteristics, such as ancestral heritage, language, religion, customs, and place of origin. Migration studies often implicitly assume the homogeneity of such a group. The conflation of nationality and ethnicity has further reinforced this homogenous perspective.² Researchers have long found noticeable ethnic subdivision among immigrant groups.³ Indeed, immigrants coming from the same country may have different ethnic identity, speak different language and have different religious belief. For instance, as Lindridge⁴ points out, Indians in Britain are subethnically divided according to their religions which has a significant influence on their consumption patterns.

However, since ethnic subdivision has tended to be placed as the background of how immigrant groups adapt and integrate into the host society,⁵ studies on internal diversity of an ethnic group have been scant. Recently, some studies have explored

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ethnic subdivision; however, their focus tends to be on the interaction among subethnic groups at the organisational level.⁶ Not much has been found on how in everyday life, individuals from different subethnic groups of a diasporic community shape, maintain and change the subethnic boundary among them. In this paper, based on the findings of a study on the internal dynamic among different groups of Chinese in Vancouver Canada, we intend to foreground the concept, subethnicity, by examining how differences in language, region of origin, and transnational politics may shape subethnicity at the interpersonal level in a Chinese immigrant community and what make cross-subethnic friendship possible.

Ethnicity and subethnicity

Ethnicity is one of the most unsettled and ill-defined fields of study.⁷ Different disciplines tend to define ethnicity in ways that fit their disciplinary conceptualisation.⁸ However, despite such disciplinary variation, most definitions are based on a combination of shared characteristics, such as language, religion, bio-racial markers, ancestral homeland, nationality, and cultural values and practice.⁹ Barth¹⁰ argues that the sharing of similar characteristics is not sufficient to make an ethnic group; it also requires, as Lamont¹¹ suggested, the *cultural processes* of exclusion and incorporation which construct and maintain a group boundary. Based on this boundary people can, intentionally or unintentionally, be placed into or self-identify with an ethnic group. Wimmer¹² argued that the making and unmaking of an ethnic boundary are complex processes that involve the intended and unintended actions of numerous actors at various levels in some situations for different purposes. Discussion of ethnic boundaries in the literature tends to focus on inter-group relationships and assume a certain homogeneity among members of an ethnic group. As Barth¹³ reminds us, within inter-group ethnic boundaries, the members of an ethnic group can be subethnically diverse and divided by different boundaries which can cause intra-group tensions. These tensions may affect the self-identification of members of the ethnic group and the making and unmaking of the inter-group ethnic boundaries between them, as a collective, and others.

Subethnicity

Extending Barth's concept of the boundary, subethnicity refers to finer boundaries drawn within an ethnic group by nationality, language, region of origin, class, or other distinctions.¹⁴ The literature and public discourse tend to conflate country of origin, nationality, and ethnicity.¹⁵ This conflation may be caused by the fact that, as Anderson¹⁶ suggested, many modern states, which according to Weber, is 'a human community which (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a certain territory',¹⁷ are formed based on a collective imagination of the shared ethnicity of their members. This imagined ethnic community often downplays its members' internal diversity in language, region, religion, and even ancestry. In many modern states, subethnicity is also a result of individuals' allegiance to their place of origin, which can be a province, a region, a town, or even a village. Often, this division is also a result of unique linguistic, cultural, and religious characteristics of the

place of origin. Bozorgmehr¹⁸ conceptualised this kind of diversity as *internal ethnicity* which ‘arises from the existence, formation, or emergence of at least one subgroup within a *nationality*, along the lines of one or more indicators of ethnicity’.

Indeed, internal ethnicity can also be found in many diaspora groups. For instance, subethnic division based on place of origin has been found in the ethnic congregation of early Italian and Chinese diasporic communities in North America.¹⁹ Meanwhile, some diaspora groups may have a long history of out-migration. Members may share similar ethnic characteristics but come from different countries instead of their ancestors’ original homeland. For instance, the Jews,²⁰ South Asians,²¹ and Chinese²² all have a long diasporic history and have spread to many parts of the world over many generations. They may have maintained some ancestral characteristics which they share with their ethnic counterparts in different parts of the world, but they have also developed their own unique cultural practices, customs, food, and language due to voluntary adaptation or forced assimilation to the host society in which their ancestors settled.²³ They are also ascribed a different nationality. This combination of cultural uniqueness and difference of nationality may form the basis of subethnic boundaries between members of a diasporic community who are from different parts of the world.

In the literature, while the shared ‘ethnic’ characteristics among members of an ethnic group are often used in the literature and public discourse to create and maintain ethnic boundaries; the subethnic differences within diasporic communities are often neglected or even suppressed. While literature on how subethnic groups within a diasporic group interact and how their interaction shapes their adaptation and integration in the host society is scant, among the identified studies, most tend to focus on the interaction among subethnic groups at the organisational level. Studies on Chinese subethnicity are good examples.

Chinese and subethnicity

The Chinese have a long migration history and many countries host large Chinese diasporic communities, which have received some attention in the subethnicity literature. Studies on Chinese subethnicity have consistently pinpointed the importance of language, hometown and place of origin as key dividing factors that form subethnic groups within Chinese diasporic communities. For instance, in contrast to Korean and Indian immigrants, Chinese immigrants in New York City tend to choose to self-identify with their subethnic identity label (e.g. Hong Kong Chinese) and build friendship networks within their own subethnic group.²⁴ In her study of the Taiwanese diasporic community in Orange County, California, Avenarius²⁵ noted that the older generation had developed their own social networks and ethnic organisations along subethnic divides (i.e. Taiwanese or mainlander), and divided by the major languages (or dialects) spoken in Taiwan (i.e. Hoklo, Hakka and others). Connections and interactions among these three linguistic groups are minimal. Similarly, Phan and Luk²⁶ found that in Toronto’s West Chinatown, connections among Chinese business owners from different places of origin, mainly Vietnam, Hong Kong, and Mainland China, are limited to business and seldom extend to social and personal links; language (here Cantonese and Mandarin) is also a dividing factor that hinders communication and trust among them.

In their study of Chinese ethnic organisations in the United States, Zhou and colleagues²⁷ found that, traditionally, many were either family/clan- or hometown-based. However, with China's rapid urbanisation, many urban dwellers shifted their adherence from their place of origin to their city of residence, which became their extended hometown.²⁸ In Chinese diasporic communities where there are increasing numbers of immigrants from Mainland China, there is a noticeable growth of modern (ethnic) organisations, whose members share an allegiance to their extended hometown.²⁹ Meanwhile, recent Chinese immigrants from Mainland China also tend to organise themselves into ethnic professional and entrepreneurial groups. However, most of these non-hometownbased organisations have specific national connotations reflecting their connection to Mainland China.

Indeed, as some studies pointed out, maintaining and enhancing a transnational connection with their hometown has traditionally been a major element of many Chinese ethnic organisations.³⁰ As Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton³¹ conceptualised it, 'transnationalism' refers to a process through which immigrants strategically 'forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement'. Transnational relations and processes are two-way. A transnational connection to the homeland (or the home town) serves multiple functions, including the maintenance of emotional and familial ties and meeting certain needs for economic³² and human capital³³ accumulation. Transnational connections are not limited to families, friends, and business partners: the connection to a nation state as the place of origin is crucial, particularly at the organisational level. Recently, with the rapid increase of out-migration from Mainland China, the Chinese government has also heightened its transnational influence in Chinese diasporic communities globally.³⁴ This has (re)shaped the intra-group dynamic transnationally at the organisational level within Chinese diasporic communities around the world. In the United States,³⁵ Singapore,³⁶ and Australia,³⁷ a growing number of Chinese ethnic organisations have established a strong connection to the Chinese government. This connection tends to generate a new internal dynamic within many Chinese diasporic communities particularly among people who came from Mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

In sum, the literature sheds light on the factors that influence the formation and interaction of subethnic groups in Chinese diasporic communities. Yet, since subethnicity is often found within ethnic organisations in immigrant communities,³⁸ most studies have focused on the organisational level. However, as Lamont and colleagues³⁹ contended, the cultural processes that demarcate ethnic (and subethnic) boundaries often take place in people's routine, repetitive interaction. Therefore, to understand how these boundaries work, it is necessary to focus on micro-level interpersonal practices. Yet we know little about cross-boundary interaction among individuals of different subethnic groups. To fill this gap in the literature, we report some preliminary findings of an exploratory study which was set to answer the research question of how individuals from different subethnic groups within the Chinese diasporic community in Vancouver, Canada, interact.

Chinese in Canada and Vancouver: a case in point

The history of Chinese immigration to Canada is over 200 years old.⁴⁰ Chinese have come to Canada from various places, such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and

Southeast Asian, at different points in time. The first wave of Chinese migrants, who came mainly from the Pearl River Delta region in South China, immigrated to Canada largely due to the gold rush and the construction of the Trans-Canada railway in the 1880s. Despite their contributions to the nation-building process, the Chinese faced great discrimination. In 1927, they were excluded from Canada by the Chinese Immigration Act. Even after the introduction of the point system in 1967, Chinese immigration to Canada only increased slowly. The rapid expansion of the Chinese diasporic community did not occur until the early 1980s when there was a huge influx from Hong Kong to Canada. Since then, China (including Hong Kong) has become one of the major sources of immigrants to Canada. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, over 380,000 Hong Kong Chinese immigrated to Canada, triggered by the return of Hong Kong to China.⁴¹ In 1998, this massive influx of Hong Kong Chinese immigrants ended abruptly, and mainland Chinese became one of the top immigrant groups to Canada.⁴²

According to the 2016 Census,⁴³ the total population of Chinese in Canada, the largest ethnic minority group, numbered 1,577,060, among whom 649,260 were born in Mainland China, 208,940 in Hong Kong, and 63,770 in Taiwan. In Metro Vancouver (hereafter Vancouver), which is the second largest centre of Chinese settlement in Canada, 499,175 people self-identified as Chinese and 20,345 as Taiwanese. Immigrants from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan represent the three major subethnic groups in the Chinese diasporic community in the Vancouver area, and 188,965 were born in Mainland China, 71,720 in Hong Kong, and 37,425 in Taiwan.⁴⁴ While members of these groups may share similar cultural origins, they immigrated to Canada from different places with distinct social, economic, cultural, and political systems, and display different political tendencies, social values, and economic behaviours. They also differ in educational background, language (Cantonese, Mandarin or other dialects), and time of arrival. This diversity has placed them into different segments within the political, cultural, and economic domains in Canada⁴⁵ and generated intra-group boundaries between them.

Methods

The findings reported in this paper are from an exploratory qualitative study conducted in Vancouver in 2015 and 2016 through interviews with 39 self-identified Chinese. This study was approved by the behavioural research ethics board of the first author's home institution. A snowball sampling strategy was employed through the personal and professional networks of members of the research team and the support of local community organisations. To capture diverse perspectives, a few specific criteria were used. Other than the place of origin (Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, other) and gender, we deliberately sampled a group of Chinese journalists ($N=6$) and social service providers ($N=11$) who shared not only their personal but also professional observations with us. These two groups of professionals were also included due to their continuous and lengthy professional interactions with the Chinese community. We also sampled a group of one-point-five and second-generation youth ($N=13$). Another eight participants were sampled in pairs. They were close friends from different places of origin. We conducted a semi-structured interview for 14 individuals and two focus group interviews (service providers and youths). They were asked about their general observation on the relationships among different Chinese immigrant communities; reflection on their own personal network,

Table 1. Demographics of participants.

Variable	Classification	Number
Source of origin	Mainland China	8
	Hong Kong	15
	Taiwan	2
	Canada/Others	13
Gender	Male	16
	Female	22
Age	30 or below	18
	31 or above	20

experiences at work and in their personal life; and suggestions of key factors that can support positive relationships and acceptance of other Chinese groups and larger Canadian society. Table 1 is the demographic information of the participants.

Interviews were conducted in English, Cantonese, or Mandarin as preferred by the participants, audio-taped, and transcribed in the language used in the interview. Observations cited in the paper which were written in Chinese were translated into English and back-translated by different authors to ensure accuracy. A thematic analysis⁴⁶ was used to analyse the data with the assistance of NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative analysis programme. All names quoted below are pseudonyms.

Findings

Despite differences in place of origin, gender, age, and generation, the participants shared many similar experiences and observations. A few key patterns were identified. In brief, the participants reported that differences in place of origin and mother tongue are dividing factors that created and maintained the subethnic boundaries within the Chinese community in Vancouver. Interactions between different subethnic groups are situational. While members of different subethnic groups maintain functional interaction in the work setting, in their personal life they are segmented and isolated from each other. Transnational political tensions among the different places of origin are a factor that further divides them, representing an obstacle to generating mutual trust. However, despite internal subethnic division, Chinese-Canadian identity has been used loosely by most participants to maintain the larger ethnic boundary of the Chinese diasporic community in the Canadian context.

Segmented community and situational interaction

In Vancouver, Chinese from different places of origin are highly mixed in the workplace, school, the public arena, and the neighbourhood. They do not lack opportunities to interact. However, there was a strong consensus among the participants that Chinese from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other places tend to maintain a segmented social life from one another. For instance, Rose, a youth participant from Hong Kong who has a close friend from Mainland China, stated that in the Chinese church she attends, members from different places do not mix:

For the Chinese [mainly Hong Kong Chinese] congregation, we have Chinese people who actually speak Mandarin. We also have a class for Mandarin Sunday school but the thing is that I don't really see the families mixing. I never see them talking to each other.

This observation was echoed by Sandy, a young woman born in Canada to a Hong Kong immigrant family, who felt that ‘the Chinese community is separated into Cantonese speakers and Mandarin speakers. I don’t see these two groups interact much, except maybe for business.’ The exception noted by Sandy indicates that adherence to the subethnic boundary is situational.

Indeed, most participants reported that they work well with Chinese from different places of origin at work or at school but, in the personal domain, they prefer to socialise with friends from the same place of origin and/or who speak the same language. The story of Roger, a journalist at a local Chinese-language newspaper who immigrated from Mainland China, may shed light on this segmentation:

I think in our team at XX newspaper, we work together very happily, very well. We have people from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan . . . In recent years there seem to be more people who speak Mandarin, including myself. This is because there has been more immigration from Mainland China. This is reflected in our office because more co-workers were coming from Hong Kong before. I don’t think our regional differences cause any barriers at work. We get along very well.

At work, he has functional working relationships with colleagues from Taiwan and Hong Kong, but Roger admitted that they seldom socialise outside the workplace. Instead, his friends are mostly from Mainland China:

This is because I have fewer friends from Hong Kong than from China. Also, [my Hong Kong friends] are mainly from my office, co-workers. We sometimes chat. I have other [Hong Kong friends], but not many. My friends are mainly from China.

Many participants shared a similar experience. For instance, Betsy, from Hong Kong, and Laura, from Mainland China, identified each other as a close friend, but both have no other close friend from another place of origin.

Determinants of intra-group relations

The participants gave a few major reasons for this segmented connection with people from other subethnic groups. A few suggested that a busy schedule limited their time and energy to develop friendships outside their inner circle (i.e. mainly family and friends from the same place of origin). Some participants attributed this to the high turnover of the workplace. A few suggested that they do not want to talk about work outside the workplace and so do not develop relationships with colleagues into friendships. Among all the identified reasons, language, culture, and political tensions among homelands seem to be the most frequently mentioned determinants that create subethnic boundaries between the participants.

Language and culture: a bonding and dividing filter

In 2016, Vancouver was home to 184,370 people who identified Cantonese as their mother tongue, 174,920 Mandarin, and 26,071 other Chinese dialects.⁴⁷ While Mandarin is the official national language of China, there are a great many mutually unintelligible regional languages spoken throughout the country. The best-known of these outside China is Cantonese, a regional language spoken in Guangdong and Hong Kong from where the majority of Chinese migrants have come historically. Many participants noted how their mother tongue has influenced their connection

and interaction with Chinese from other subethnic groups. Jonnie, a social service provider, came from Guangdong and is fluent in both Cantonese and Mandarin. Her experience of working in a restaurant indicated how Chinese who speak different mother tongues pick and choose their connections:

When [people from Hong Kong] hear that you are from Guangdong, the first thing they talk about is “dim sum”, and then “yam chah” [a popular Cantonese saying of having dimsum as breakfast or lunch]. I have some clients [from Mainland China]. They speak Mandarin. They told me that they prefer servers who speak Mandarin to help them. They say that this is not because they don’t like [servers from Hong Kong]. They only think that, for example, in Richmond [one of the cities in Metro Vancouver], it is hard for [servers from Hong Kong] to speak in Mandarin. I also feel tired as well. Therefore, they prefer [servers] who speak Mandarin.

Language is not just about phonetics. It is also about style, intonation, accent, and use of words. These also differentiate people from different places. Flora, a journalist, who immigrated from Mainland China, explained why she does not have many non-Mainland Chinese friends:

Of course, at the beginning, because of their backgrounds – for example, I have co-workers from Hong Kong and Taiwan. When interacting with them, from the way they speak, their intonation, their use of words, you know that they come from a different place than you. But you still – at the beginning, you are relatively cautious in choosing words, because you don’t want to confuse them.

Another journalist, Myles, also from Hong Kong, shared that when he tried to interact with Mainland Chinese in Mandarin, he also needed to be cautious of the expression and slang that they use, which are cultural markers:

When I occasionally need to interact with Mainland Chinese, I need to use their slangs to talk to them. If you use the slangs they use, they will feel that you understand, or even understand more than them. If you don’t refer to their thinking, slangs, background, they may not even talk to or interact with you.

Many participants considered shared lived experience and culture to be important to their choice of friends. For instance, Rose said that she feels closer to people from Hong Kong, not only because they speak Cantonese, but also because “we have all lived in Hong Kong. We all know where we are, and we know the inside jokes about Hong Kong.” Annie, who came from Mainland China, shared a similar experience:

I realised that even though we are Chinese, we are different. We have different culture. But if I meet somebody from Mainland China, we have the same food. When I say something, they know what I am talking about. But when I say something to Sandy or Wilma [friends from Hong Kong], they might not know what I am talking about. So of course I feel closer to Mainland Chinese.

Laura, who came to Canada from Mainland China 16 years ago, observed a major language shift in Vancouver’s Chinese diasporic community. When she first arrived, Cantonese was the dominant language and she struggled to learn it to find employment:

Cantonese was sort of a key language you had to speak if you were, or wanted to be employed by a Cantonese speaker. Since then things have changed quite a bit, let’s say, in the last five years, maybe ten.

The significant increase of Mandarin-speaking Mainland Chinese immigrants has led to a different subethnic dynamic within the Chinese diasporic community of Vancouver. Ross is a journalist from Taiwan who has been in Vancouver for over 20 years. He also struggled to learn Cantonese when he first arrived. He shared a similar observation: *'In the past, you could not survive by speaking Mandarin in Chinatown. Now it is fine to speak Mandarin in Richmond.'*

The increasing use of Mandarin has become a source of conflict between Chinese from Hong Kong and the mainland, the two largest subethnic groups in Vancouver. Many Cantonese-speaking participants, mostly from Hong Kong, reported negative experiences when using Cantonese in Chinese supermarkets, whose employees are increasingly dominated by Mandarin speakers. For instance, Will, a Hong Kong Chinese service provider, shared a story: *'I don't know how to speak Mandarin. One time, when I went shopping, [shopkeepers] said, "You don't know how to speak Mandarin? You are Chinese, you need to know how to speak (Mandarin)."'*

The language tensions in the Chinese diasporic community are also associated with various prejudices between Chinese from different places of origin and have reinforced subethnic boundaries.

Biases and discrimination: boundary fixing

Many participants recognised that within the Chinese community, people from different places of origin seem to have noticeable and mutual biases against each other and that these are an open secret. Some of these prejudices are cultural and some socio-economic. Myles, a journalist from Hong Kong, summarises how Chinese from different places of origin stereotype each other:

Taiwanese think that Hong Kong [Chinese] come from a British colony. They think Hong Kong people should be more advanced, more civilised. . . . Taiwan now has a legislative council members of which used to fighting each other Now the situation is better and relatively civilised. Hong Kong people see Taiwanese as old-fashioned, but they feel that they are easy to interact with. Probably because most of the people who have arrived recently [from Mainland China] are very rich but rude, [Hong Kongers] find it difficult to get along with them. Also, their level of civility does not meet the expectations of Hong Kong people.

According to Myles, Chinese from Hong Kong and Taiwan tend to have a more positive view of each other and a negative view of mainlanders. Similar observations were made by a few service providers who suggested that Taiwanese and Hong Kong Chinese service recipients are relatively reasonable and easy to work with. These service providers have a less favourable view of mainlanders, particularly those who came in recent years. Echoing Myles, there is a general sense, even among participants from Mainland China, that recent immigrants from China are very well off, show off, and are even 'uncivilised.' Penny recalled a recently arrived family from Mainland China who visited her office. She felt that after they sat down, they arrogantly asked her:

"We just arrived. Is there anything you can do to help us?" Apparently they forgot that because I could see their documentation, I knew their background, I knew that they are investors, entrepreneurs. They seemed to think that Canada owes them even though they have just arrived.

The mutual bias between Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese is common knowledge. Wilma, from Hong Kong, and Annie, from Mainland China, described themselves as close friends. In the interview, they had an exchange of perspectives:

Wilma: Because [Hong Kong] people speak Cantonese, they may not feel comfortable speaking Mandarin. Even if they do [speak Cantonese], they prefer to go to Taiwanese people. For those from Mainland China [hesitating] ... I am a little bit ashamed of myself. I think there is a kind of bias. ... [Hong Kong people] say, "Oh, [Mainland Chinese] are not ready. They don't really want to try." ... When [Hong Kong Chinese] read the newspaper, for instance, if there is a car accident, they say, "Oh, they are from Mainland China. They are from Mainland China; that is why they went through the red light or whatever."

Annie: You know I heard [about] this, I've heard lots of things like this, the same thing. Mainland Chinese will think, "People from Hong Kong, they don't like us. They just don't like us." Then they just stay away from them.

These biases may explain why people from different subethnic groups choose not to befriend each other. Indeed, many biases in the Chinese diasporic community in Vancouver are transnationally generated from places of origin.

Transnational politics: reinforcing segmentation

The historical and political trajectories of Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong have affected the relationships among the governments and people of these three places from where most Chinese immigrants came to Canada. Recently, socio-political tensions between Mainland China and both Hong Kong and Taiwan have been high due to the increasing direct intervention of the Chinese government in Hong Kong's socio-economic affairs⁴⁸ and Taiwan's sovereignty debate. These tensions have had strong impacts on the Chinese diasporic community in Vancouver. Flora, a journalist immigrated from Mainland China, experienced this:

I believe the interactions between most people – I can't say all – most people of the first generation of immigrants, including the three ethnic groups [sic] from Taiwan, Mainland China, and Hong Kong can't reach a deep level because of political reasons. This includes interaction between our generation of Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong immigrants. I believe there is a political aspect there, which impedes some of their interaction. If they hesitate, they can't be friends.

A similar observation was made by Ross, a journalist from Taiwan. He noticed that the election in Taiwan always generated a contentious debate between the pro-independence and the pro-nationalist immigrants from Taiwan. Mainland Chinese immigrants also actively engaged in this debate against the pro-independence camp. Meanwhile, anti-mainlander tourist sentiment in Hong Kong has also reinforced the mutual prejudices between Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Chinese subethnic groups:

The situation in Hong Kong is that they have more contact with Mainland China. Many Hong Kong people can clearly feel the impact of large numbers of Mainland Chinese tourists in their daily lives. Their feeling [about Mainland Chinese] is stronger than "dislike." There is probably an atmosphere of loathing. This atmosphere extends more or less to [Canada]. ... I think everyone usually gets along well; if there is no special incident, this feeling will not be spread.

Transnational political tension has made many of the participants very careful when interacting with Chinese from other places of origin. While keeping a polite distance to

avoid this hidden tension, people are careful when developing close connections with people from other places, as Roger had experienced:

When you talk about these [transnational-political] topics, you need to be very careful. Sometimes, when you see someone does not like something you said, you don't say it again, or you think of a way to say it more indirectly We get along very well at the beginning, probably because we don't have deep interactions. However, when you say what you think from the heart, someone else may think, "Why do you think like this? It is different from what I think." So this person will not interact with you again.

Indeed, avoiding politically sensitive issues is a way to maintain a healthy cross-subethnic relationship. A pair of close friends, Laura from Mainland China and Betsy from Hong Kong, seldom touch on political issues:

Laura: I don't know if we avoid it. But I guess it's a question of the intensity of the discussion or debate, yes. At least I feel like I have tried not to get too intensely into conversations about that sort of political thing if it's too close to home. I mean, I am sure political subjects have never been a high-priority discussion point.

Betsy: Very rarely. We don't talk about politics. We seldom talk about these things. . . . We usually talk about our lives, our work. We seldom talk about political issues.

Laura and Betsy are examples of people from different places of origin and with different mother tongues who break the subethnic boundary. Perhaps we can ask that other than avoiding sensitive conversations, what else makes such cross-subethnic friendship possible?

Breaking the subethnic boundary: a willing or unwilling act

Like inter-group boundaries, the subethnic boundary is not unbreakable. Although differences of language separate some, sharing the same mother tongue can have a bonding effect on people who come from different places. For instance, Rose recalled how she met Lori, a close friend from a Hong Kong Chinese family who grew up in Mainland China:

On the first day of class, I met another girl from Hong Kong and we were talking in Cantonese in the street, and she [Lori] came up to us randomly and was like, "Oh, you guys speak Cantonese too," and then she just came along. And we became friends like that.

While dividing people, language and culture also bridge people from different places of origin. Jerry, a service provider from Hong Kong, suggested that among all Mainland Chinese, he felt closest to those from Guangdong province, because of cultural and linguistic similarities:

I think that, in terms of culture . . . I can accept people who speak Cantonese, those from the south of Guangdong. I find it easier to accept people from Guangzhou. Even though you can hear that people from different places [in south Guangdong] have different accents, you feel close when you talk to them. . . . We clearly understand each other.

Flora from Mainland China had similar experiences when interacting with colleagues from Hong Kong and Taiwan:

In the work environment, I have contacts with co-workers from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Although the majority of my co-workers are from Hong Kong, those I got to know at the beginning were from Taiwan. I think this is probably because of the language of communication. Taiwanese co-workers also speak Mandarin. Of course, the words they use are different [from ours] and their intonations are different. I got to know Hong Kong co-workers later.

On the other hand, being Chinese in Canada seems to be a situational factor that connects people's Chinese identity together. A few participants agreed that regardless of where they are from, Chinese are classified as a single ethnic group in Canada. Under this ethnic label, Chinese from different places of origin face similar challenges as immigrants to Canadian society. Betty, a service provider, put this in a larger perspective:

They can't see any difference. That means that people around me see me and they know I am Chinese. I am from Hong Kong, they don't see me as from Hong Kong. They see someone from China. This is because if I don't talk . . . they see me as from China. They won't see me as from Hong Kong. Even if I tell them that I am from Hong Kong, I need to tell them that [Hong Kong] is in southern China. I need to show them where Hong Kong is. Not many people can see the difference. They think that you are yellow skin [sic] so you are Chinese.

Many of the participants felt that being Chinese in Canada has a bonding effect on all Chinese groups. Ross stated:

If we put the three regions aside and talk about "Chinese here". They support different political parties. Some people may support very small political parties. However, when we meet and talk, I think the exchange is very good. When we discuss Canadian affairs, regardless of which political party you like, we talk about Canadian affairs and we forget where we come from. . . . It can be easier to live in harmony that way. So I believe that when we get involved in local affairs, we [different Chinese subethnic groups] interact in greater harmony.

The Chinese-Canadian identity has brought together Chinese from different places of origin, willingly or unwillingly. The shared experience of living in Canada is situationally powerful in helping individuals who are willing to break the subethnic boundary. While sharing the same mother tongue is important, many, particularly service providers and journalists, expressed a strong motivation to learn the other language. Maria shared that:

I am from Hong Kong. Speaking Cantonese is more comfortable. If someone speaks Mandarin, I will try my best to speak Mandarin. Although my Mandarin is clumsy, they will say, "You speak so well." They are very kind. I try my best to communicate.

Eight of our participants identified a close friend from a different subethnic group. Laura and her close friend Betsy have intentionally maintained their relationship by focusing on shared experience in Canada:

What happens back home, whether it is in Hong Kong or Mainland China, doesn't come into our conversation very often. Our conversation is really about our life now, in Vancouver and in Canada. So yes, we are Chinese-Canadian, however you want to say it.

Among our one-point-five and second-generation youth participants, many have pointed out that they do not have a strong identification with particular group of

Chinese. Instead, their identification with Chinese seems to be strategic. Here are two examples:

- (A) *I feel like I use the term Chinese-Canadian strategically to ally myself with folks, to be like, well, I support your struggles; I want to be like respectful of your history, and that's why I would use that [Chinese-Canadian] to describe myself.*
- (B) *If you go to a restaurant and try to speak English with them, and you look Chinese, you get different service. But if you speak Cantonese or Mandarin in a Chinese restaurant and identify with a Chinese culture, you will get different service to an extent. So for myself, it really depends on what situation and which group I want to identify myself with.*

In sum, despite the fact that Chinese immigrants to Canada may be different in many aspects, they experience similar historical, social and political contexts that require them to have some flexibilities to strategically break the subethnic boundary and seek certain ethnic unity among themselves.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings above have shown how individual members of different subethnic groups in Vancouver's Chinese diasporic community interact with each other. Learning from this study, we have a few observations that may inform future research on subethnicity.

Concurring with the existing literature on subethnicity, place of origin, mother tongue, culture, and transnational politics have significant roles to play in demarcating and maintaining the subethnic boundaries of the Chinese participants in this study. The language divide intersects with difference in place of origin. These two factors form the foundational basis that divides the Chinese diasporic community in Vancouver. Biases and discrimination between the various subethnic groups are identified. While origins in different regions or jurisdictions are inherited factors, transnational politics and the associated tensions in faraway lands are further reinforced by regional biases and perceptions. The influence of transnational politics on interpersonal interactions at the individual level cannot be underestimated, particularly when immigrants tend to maintain close and frequent contacts with their homeland through families, friends, and social media.

Our participants were aware of the dividing influence of political issues related to their homelands, which have become taboo in their conversations with Chinese from different places of origin in Canada. Avoidance is a major strategy adopted by them to maintain a functional relationship with members from other subethnic groups. The act of avoidance signifies the conscious or unconscious efforts of members of different subethnic groups to reinforce, practice, or break the subethnic segmentation within the community. The findings of this study indicate that our participants tend to befriend people from a similar subethnic background while strategically maintaining a functional distance from people of different subethnic groups. While living strategically segmented from Chinese of other subethnic groups, our participants were conscious that they share the same 'ethnic reality.' As Chinese Canadians, they are confined to the same ethnic boundary separating them from the dominant group in Canada. Within the

inter-group ethnic boundary, they face similar challenges and the internal differences among them are ignored.

Findings of this study may extend the subethnicity literature, which focuses mostly on organisational-level interaction. As Giddens⁴⁹ suggested, human agency (i.e. individual) and structure (i.e. organisation) are dialectically informed and limited by each other. Similarly, Lamont⁵⁰ suggested that ethnic boundaries between groups (or subgroups) are created and maintained through continuous, routine, and repetitive practice at the individual level. The stories of this group of participants provide some preliminary insight into how, at the micro (or interpersonal) level, individuals exercise their human agency when deciding how to interact with people from other subethnic groups.

While their stories are useful in understanding how ethnic boundaries, at least in the subethnic context, are shaped by the interpersonal interactions of individuals in different situations, they also raised a few questions that may warrant future studies. First, as some participants noticed, Chinese from different origins and speakers of different languages are self-segregated within the Chinese church. Following Giddens' idea, we question how interpersonal interaction dialectically shapes and is shaped by subethnic organisations. Second, many participants have also shown a strong adherence to their own subethnic identity. However, being Chinese in Canada, they are, voluntarily or involuntarily, identified as one single group of Chinese. The question is: how do people negotiate between their own subethnic identity and the imposed ethnic label? So far not much has been done to explore the interrelationship between subethnic and ethnic identities.

Third, we question in what ways and the consequences of the intra-group dynamic among different subethnic groups of a single diasporic community may lead to competition for 'authenticity' of ethnic culture. For instance, in 2011, a group of Chinese, who were mainly from Mainland and owners of a property in the area, opposed the building of a hospice facility on the campus of a local university (CBC, 3 June 2011). They claimed that it was a cultural taboo for Chinese to live close to dying people. Their claim was rejected by another group of Chinese, mainly from Hong Kong, who supported the facility by counter-arguing that Chinese culture respects death and dying. This competition for cultural authenticity led to a noticeable resentment of Chinese presented in the English media which, in turn, problematised the mainstream understanding of Chinese ethnicity (Georgia Straits, 23 January 2011). This incident also points out the diverse and even competitive understanding of cultural values and norms among different subethnic Chinese groups. While reinforcing the subethnic boundary, this kind of competition challenges the assumption of homogeneity and solidarity within an ethnic group.

To conclude, the findings of this study shed light on the understanding of the interpersonal interaction among members from different subethnic groups of a diasporic community. While in daily life, Chinese from different subethnic groups may tend to self-segregate from one another, the subethnic boundaries among them are not rigid. Situationally, they willingly and unwillingly maintain a shared and cross-subethnic Chinese identity as a minority group in the Canadian context. Since there is sparse mention of subethnicity, particularly at a micro-level, in the current discussion of ethnic boundaries, we suggest that further research is needed to better understand how intra-group dynamic evolves among subethnic groups of a single diasporic community,

what separate as well as unite them within the community, and how this dynamic shapes intergroup ethnic boundaries and social integration of a diasporic community in the host society.

Notes

1. Satzewich and Liodakis, "Race" and Ethnicity in Canada.
2. Lindridge, "Are we fooling ourselves."
3. See Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*; Phan and Luk, "I don't say I have a business in Chinatown"; and Zhou and Lee, "Transnationalism and community building."
4. See above 2.
5. We would like to thank one of the reviewers who pointed out this important observation.
6. E.g. Zhou and Lee, "Transnationalism and community building."
7. Brubaker, "Beyond ethnicity."
8. Yinger, "Ethnicity."
9. See Read, "Measuring ethnicity with U.S. Census data"; and Yinger "Ethnicity"; and Li, "The rise and fall of Chinese immigration to Canada."
10. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.
11. Larmont, "Reflection inspired by *Ethnic Boundary Making*."
12. Wimmer, "The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries."
13. See above 10.
14. Phan and Luk, "I don't say I have a business in Chinatown."
15. See Yinger, "Ethnicity," 151–180 and Lindridge, "Are we fooling ourselves."
16. Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities*.
17. Anter, Andreas, *Max Weber's Theory of the State*, 310–311.
18. Bozorgmehr, "Internal ethnicity," 388.
19. Ibid.
20. See DellaPergola, "Jewish diaspora."
21. See Jayaram, *The Indian diaspora*.
22. See Zhou, *Contemporary Chinese Diasporas*.
23. Dufoix, *Diasporas*.
24. Min and Kim, "Ethnic and sub-ethnic attachments."
25. Avenarius, "Cooperation, conflict and integration."
26. See above 14.
27. See Zhou and Lee, "Transnationalism and community building"; and Zhou and Liu, "Homeland engagement and host-society integration."
28. Li, "The rise and fall of Chinese immigration to Canada."
29. Zhou and Lee, "Transnationalism and community building."
30. Zhou and Lee, "Transnationalism and community building"; and Zhou and Liu, "Homeland engagement and host-society integration."
31. Basch, et al., *Nation Unbound*, 6.
32. Ong, "Cultural citizenship as subject-making."
33. E.g. Kang, "Transnational motherhood."
34. Zhou and Liu, "Homeland engagement and host-society integration."
35. See above 29.
36. See above 34.
37. Kwok, "Chinese Australian urban politics."
38. Moya, "Immigrants and associations."
39. Lamont et al., "What is missing?"
40. See above 28.
41. Ley and Kobayashi, "Back in Hong Kong."
42. Wang and Lo, "Chinese immigrants in Canada."
43. Statistics Canada, *Census Profile, 2016 Census*.

44. Ibid.
45. See above 42.
46. Braun and Clarke, “Using thematic analysis in psychology.”
47. See above 43.
48. Fong and Liu, *Hong Kong 20 Years after Handover*.
49. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*.
50. Lamont et al., “What is missing?”

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