**Understanding language and (dis)belongingness
in present-day Sydney and Los Angeles using Weibo –
a preliminary proposal**

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Understanding language and (dis)belongingness in present-day Sydney and Los Angeles using Weibo – a preliminary proposal[1]

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Abstract

This project aims to examine the identity construction of Chinese immigrants in Sydney and Los Angeles using social media. It begins with an investigation of how Chinese immigrants in these two cities express and negotiate their sense of (dis)belonging on the popular Chinese social media platform *Weibo*. The target group of the study is the relatively new arrivals in these two cities: students and young professionals coming to Sydney and Los Angeles after 2000. My pilot study on the Weibo discussion about the safety issues in Sydney (Han 2013) suggests that a "nomadic" (Braidotti 2011) rather than a static Chinese identity would emerge in the Chinese immigrants' Weibo communication about their diasporic experience. By conducting a transnational comparative linguistic study of Chinese immigrants' Weibo writing in Sydney and Los Angeles, I hope to test the hypothesis that Chinese immigrants construct themselves as 'nomads' who constantly struggle and roam between two mindsets and value systems rooting in two different socio-cultural, intellectual and ideological contexts in order to empower themselves and justify their actions in the process of adaptation and resistance. The findings will shed light on the following two broader questions: 1) what does it mean to be Chinese in present-day Australia and USA, and 2) How do Chinese immigrants understand and interpret Australian and American national identity in the 21st century.

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[1] The idea of this proposal was first presented at LEWI seminar on 10/07/2013: *The expression of disbelongingness by Chinese immigrants on Weibo: Chineseness in present-day Australia and US.*

BACKGROUND

From the linguistic point of view, Weibo communication is significant because of its unique features that distinguish it from both traditional media (e.g. newspapers, print books) and other new media (e.g. Facebook, blogs, etc.). That is, Weibo is permeated with creative language practices through which Chinese people can express their ideas and communicate with others immediately and effectively:

- It is a type of online writing that has low literacy requirement and allows self-expression. So anyone can write and publish whatever he or she likes. In this way, individuals could be empowered to resist outside power and political tensions.

- It is a type of creative writing that is produced around constraints (i.e. online censorship) and limitations (i.e. Weibo posts are set to a 140-character limit) and through manipulation of linguistic forms. For example, he2xie4 (literally means "river crab") was created by Weibo users as a homophone for he2xie2 (i.e. "harmonious") to avoid the Internet censorship of China's ideologically-laden term "Harmonious Society".

- It is a type of private writing that is shared with the public. Weibo posts are also open for comments by and discussions with both known and anonymous others.

- It is a mobile and portable writing that can be produced and accessed immediately at any time, any place. According to 31st China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) Report, 65.6% of Weibo users access and manage their Weibo on their mobile devices.

- It is an innovative platform that incorporates multimedia content-sharing features, allowing original and even artful integration of linguistic forms and other semiotic resources in meaning-making (e.g. pictures, videos, emoticons).

- It enables a new communication setting which reconfigures the interaction between users (e.g. talking to other people or re-posting using the "@UserName" format; adding hashtags with "#HashName#" format to group users and posts). This new setting of communication opens up a new realm of self-representation and group negotiation in which identities and feelings are linguistically constructed products.

In sum, Weibo provides new and rich data sources for investigating migrant experience, perception, concerns and attitude reported by Chinese immigrants themselves. It serves as an online archive of first-hand linguistic records of thoughts and feelings of Chinese immigrants in which the sense of (dis)belonging would manifest and Chineseness would be formed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why does (dis)belonging matter? Migration is more than a change of geographical locations (e.g. Ang, 2001, 2007, 2010; Rebertson, 2013; Singh, Cabraal & Robertson, 2010). Immigrants bring with them money, objects, expertise, habits, memories, cultural practices and beliefs when they move to a new place. The meanings and relations of these things to them would be re-negotiated within this new context (Hui & Li, 2013). Immigrants' own identity and sense of (dis)belonging would also be re-defined in this process of adaptation. As social psychologist Susan Fiske (2006) argues, the sense of belonging is a core social motive for people to interact with social situations and form close relationships and groups. People's needs to belong also "reflect some kinds of attitudes, prejudices, and social influence" (ibid: 18). Davidson (2008: 12) also points out that "migrants negotiate a feeling of belonging based on their perceptions and memories of their social situation". Therefore, building up a clear picture of the sense of (dis)belonging, is essential for understanding immigrants. The understanding of (dis)belonging relates to the attraction and retention of immigrants in a receiving nation. It is associated with the "home feelings" and wellbeing of the native majority under the impact of immigration in that nation (Duyvendak, 2011). It also provides a new perspective to examine immigrant integration in a nation in which immigrant newcomers and the host communities need to mutually adapt to one another. Although both Australia and USA are major receiving countries of immigrants, the concept of immigrant integration is embedded in two contrasting ideologies. Australia promotes the 'nation-as-a new and better home' rhetoric, which emphasises opportunities and responsibilities. USA, however, advocates the 'nation as homeland' ideal which places the issue of security and the feeling of rootedness at its centre (Duyvendak, 2011). Thus, it would be interesting to see if Chinese immigrants living on two opposite hemispheres would experience and interpret 'integration' in a similar or conflicting way and if its derived sense of '(dis)belonging' has region-specific features.

Although there is a long and rich literature on Chinese diaspora where immigrants' settlement experience and their struggles with their identities in a host country are well documented (e.g. Collins, 2002; Eng & Davidson, 2008; Lan, 2011; Lien, 2008; Madokoro, 2011; McKeown, 1999; Paul, 2011; Hearn, 2012), the concept '(dis)belonging' has never been clearly defined. Nor the use of the term is made in a very reflective way. The socio-cultural specific expression of '(dis)belonging' and its associated meanings have rarely been investigated (cf. Eng & Davidson, 2008; Stephen, 2000). Therefore, the need to theorise (dis)belonging should not be ignored.

A preliminary semantic analysis of the Chinese word for 'belonging' could suggest the complexity of this concept. The Chinese word for 'belonging' is a word consisting of two characters: *gui* (return, revert to, be part of) and *shu* (place, category). The compounding of these two characters indicates not only a movement in a reverse direction or a change to an earlier place or conditions, but also a process of acceptance and a status of membership. Moreover, the interpretation of Chinese expression of (dis)belonging is tightly intertwined with Chinese philosophical heritage that emphasizes family bonds and collectivism. Also it is underlined by the Chinese root-seeking culture which defines Chinese immigrants' home-making practices and constructs a symbolic connection between Chinese immigrants, their understanding of self and community, their nostalgia for the place of origin, and their longing for acknowledgement and acceptance by the wider society in which they live (cf. Wang 2012).

APPROACH

In order to decipher 'disbelonging', this project will collect data from Weibo posts written by Chinese immigrants in Sydney and Los Angeles. Weibo is a new and unique place to observe Chinese immigrants' expression of '(dis)belonging'. As a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook, Weibo has become one of the most popular platforms for Chinese-speaking netizens to disseminate information. It has also attracted a huge number of Chinese immigrants in Australia and USA. According to Sina Weibo Survey 2012, there are over 600,000 Weibo users in Australia, whereas the number of Weibo users in USA has reached 450,000. Thus Weibo has become a major channel for overseas Chinese to share information, interact with each other and stay connected with the homeland. More importantly, Weibo equips Chinese-speaking netizens with a space where they can more freely express themselves, a powerful tool

to disseminate messages to a large public audience, and a potential to engage the public and generate influence or public pressure (Tong & Lei 2012). Thus, data collected from Weibo would offer findings that might be different from those of the previous studies, which are largely based on historical accounts of diaspora communities, the analyses of diaspora literary works written from individual understanding and perception, or investigations based personal experience and observation or small-scale interviews (e.g. Barrett, 2012; Eng & Davidson, 2008; Lan, 2011, 2012; Leung, 2005; Motomura, 2006; Rocha 2012).

The theoretical framework of this project is an integration of Bucholtz & Hall's theory on language and identity (2005, 2010), Critical Discourse Analysis with a cognitive linguistic dimension (e.g. Flowerdew, 2012; Hart, 2010; O'Halloran, 2003; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), and Nomadic theory (Braidotti 2011). Under this framework, Chineseness, or being Chinese, is a discursive and dynamic construct that emerges in the linguistic manifestation and negotiation of the sense of (dis)belonging among Chinese immigrants. The analysis of Chinese immigrants' Weibo posts are then investigated at three levels:

- linguistic manifestation of (dis)belonging;
- contextualised discourse, where immigrants' language practices are invoked and interact with broader socio-cultural and ideologically-formed situations;
- cognitive process at which Weibo users' Chineseness emerges and evolves.

This approach is an innovative combination of a corpus-based approach to discourse analysis with in-depth interviews. Corpus-based approaches have been widely used in analysing patterns of language use in a large collection of authentic written texts (e.g. Baker, 2009, 2010; McEnery, 2012; Viana et al, 2011; Wodak & Myer, 2008). In this project, the patterns in the context of Australia will be based on a corpus of Weibo posts written about the same topic #Australian Federal Election 2013#. The posts will be gathered by the researcher using the Sina Weibo streaming application programming interface (API), which provides programmatic access to the Sina Weibo platform's back-end database, including posts and comments, trending topics and the related posts, users and relations, and other types of data. The

upcoming Australian Federal Election provides a great opportunity to observe how Chinese immigrants would react to the candidates' campaign messages and argue for their quest and right to belong (e.g. the competing discourses surrounding immigration policies and multicultural policies). A similar approach will be applied to the analysis in the context of the USA. The American corpus will be comprised of posts sharing a topic that may attract a similar level of attention and discussion among Chinese immigrants in the USA in 2014.

Once the data have been retrieved and compiled, the next step is to identify and analyse the patterns of language practices in Weibo communication by using WordSmith 6.0 (an integrated suite of concordance, keywords and wordlist programs designed by Mike Scott 2012). For example, the categorical label 'Chinese' and socially meaningful terms such as 'home', 'root' and 'belong' will be examined in terms of frequency of occurrences, collocations, and syntactic positions. Predominant patterns will be noted, and contextualised interpretations of the patterns will be sought.

The identified patterns will then be used as references for the later small-scale in-depth interviews with Chinese immigrant Weibo users from Guangdong, Fujian and Shanghai. These three regions have a long history and tradition of migration to Australia and USA. They account for the majority of Chinese immigrants in both nations, and are still major sources of students going overseas from China. Also the dialects of these three regions play a crucial role in defining the Chineseness of their immigrants: Cantonese and Hakka have long been regarded as languages different from Mandarin Chinese, whereas Shanghai dialect is widely believed to be associated with the Shanghai speakers' sense of pride and privilege. The interviews will take a dialogical approach and ask interviewees about their perception and evaluation of the patterns of disbelonging identified in the corpora. Their own understanding and interpretation of being Chinese in Australia and USA will also be encouraged during the interviews. This approach, as Davidson (2008: 14) argues, may enable "a more nuanced understanding of how Chinese migrants derive a feeling of belonging in the coalescence of identity flows that occurs in the spaces of memory".

OUTCOMES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The results from this study will contribute to the understanding of the emerging trends of Chinese language use outside China from the perspective of Sydney and Los Angeles. It will provide a better and detailed interpretation of the dynamic Internet

Chinese language that transcends the geographical territories. The findings of the project will also provide researchers in Australia and USA a great opportunity to share research findings that aim to theorise the relationships between language, identity and social media. As the aim of the study is to investigate the construction of Chineseness on social media, the findings will advance knowledge of overseas Chinese efforts in maintaining and developing ties and connections on local, national and transnational levels. Also, the findings could suggest region-specific challenges faced by Chinese students and young professionals.

Weibo writing outside China involves challenges of interlingual and intercultural communication. Australian and American politicians (e.g. Kevin Rudd, William Tong), media outlets (e.g. SBS, IB Times) and universities (e.g. UWS, UCLA) use Weibo as a platform to reach Chinese communities. Overseas Chinese can use various linguistic resources – including Mandarin, Chinese dialects and English – on Weibo to connect with their homeland and to adapt to or resist host countries. Therefore, the current political debate around the multicultural policy in Australia can benefit through better understanding of USA and California policy and community language practices. Both Australia and USA will benefit from increased understanding of the public opinion and sentiment in Chinese communities that underpin the words used in China's social media. Furthermore, having a clearer understanding of Chinese immigrants' self-interpretation of their experience in and perception of Sydney and Los Angeles can give suggestions for local governments on designing migrant integration strategies that can appeal to Chinese mind and heart, motivate Chinese communities to participate in decision-making process and contribute to the development of multicultural communities.

EVALUATION AND DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

In order to make this project known to a wider audience, the findings will be disseminated on national and international conferences in Australia and USA (e.g. *North American Conference* on *Chinese Linguistics*, *The International Symposium* on *Chinese Language and Discourse*). In addition, results will be communicated through peer-reviewed journals in the fields of linguistics, migration studies and communication (e.g. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Media, Culture and Society*, *Emotion, Space and Society*). As a media language researcher, I will also work closely and actively with university media officers and local media outlets to ensure that the

compelling findings have an impact beyond the Academy. For example, I will set up a Weibo presence of the project. On this platform, I will share my findings, and invite comments and suggestions from Weibo users. Hash tags will be used to encourage focused discussions between Chinese immigrants living in Australia and USA. In this way, a virtual and transnational community of Chinese immigrants would be formed, and the results from the study will be tested.

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