

## **Performing Hybrid Identities: Discursive Construction of Sri Lankan-Chinese Self and Other**

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### **Abstract**

The study explores the identity performance of second-generation Chinese immigrants in Sri Lanka, a minority group comprising 0.02% of the population. Their identity is problematized by several scholars highlighting their intermediary social position and declining engagement in traditional Chinese cultural practices compared to their counterparts in Southeast Asia. Therefore, this study investigates how these individuals self-identify and position themselves in identity descriptions examining the linguistic devices employed in talk. Additionally, the research explores the discursive construction and negotiation of Chinese immigrant identities. The theoretical framework emphasizes the nexus between performance, language, and identity, with performance being pivotal in construction of identities. Subjectivities and subject positions are distinguished, with subjectivities representing personal views and subject positions reflecting societal perceptions. Interviews with four dental technicians employed through nonprobability sampling, form the basis of data collection, employing discourse analysis techniques to explore linguistic devices used in identity construction. Results indicate a complex interplay between subject positions and subjectivities, a negotiation between Sri Lankan Chinese and Chinese national identities. The conclusion highlights the nuanced nature of ethnic identity performance, where subject positions and subjectivities are intertwined, as individuals navigate their unique identities within a societal context often conflated with an archetypal heroic identity.

ජනගහනයෙන් 0.02%කින් සමන්විත සුළුතර කණ්ඩායමක් වන ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ දෙවන පරම්පරාවේ චීන සංක්‍රමණිකයන්ගේ අනන්‍යතා කතිකාව මෙම අධ්‍යයනයෙන් ගවේෂණය කෙරේ. අග්නිදිග ආසියාවේ සිටින ඔවුන්ගේ සගයන් හා සසඳන විට විද්වතුන් කිහිප දෙනෙකු ඔවුන්ගේ අතරමැදි සමාජ තත්ත්වය ඉස්මතු කිරීම සහ සම්ප්‍රදායික චීන සංස්කෘතික භාවිතයන්හි අඩුවීම හේතුවෙන් ඔවුන්ගේ අනන්‍යතාවය ගැටලුකාරී වේ. එම නිසා, මෙම අධ්‍යයනය මගින් මෙම පුද්ගලයින් ස්වයං-හඳුනා ගන්නා ආකාරය සහ භාවිත කරන ලද භාෂාමය උපාංග පරීක්ෂා කිරීමේ අනන්‍යතා විස්තරයන් තුළ ස්ථානගත වන්නේ කෙසේද යන්න විමර්ශනය කරයි. මීට අමතරව, පර්යේෂණය චීන සංක්‍රමණික අනන්‍යතාව පිළිබඳ සාකච්ඡාමය ගොඩනැගීම සහ සාකච්ඡා ගවේෂණය කරයි. න්‍යායික රාමුව කාර්ය සාධනය, භාෂාව සහ අනන්‍යතාවය අතර සම්බන්ධය අවධාරණය කරයි, කාර්ය සාධනය අනන්‍යතා ගොඩනැගීමේදී ප්‍රධාන වේ. විෂයයන් සහ විෂය ආස්ථානයන් වෙන්කර හඳුනාගත හැකි අතර, ආන්තීයත්වය පුද්ගලික අදහස් නියෝජනය කරන අතර විෂය ආස්ථානයන් සමාජ සංජානන පිළිබිඹු කරයි. දත්ත කාර්මික ශිල්පීන් හතර දෙනෙකු සමඟ සම්මුඛ සාකච්ඡා දත්ත රැස්

කිරීමේ පදනම සාදයි, අන්‍යන්‍යතා ගොඩනැගීමේදී භාවිතා කරන භාෂාමය උපාංග ගවේෂණය කිරීම සඳහා කතිකාව විශ්ලේෂණ ශිල්පීය ක්‍රම භාවිතා කරයි. ශ්‍රී ලංකා චීන සහ චීන ජාතික අන්‍යන්‍යතා අතර සාකච්ඡා සමඟ විෂය ආස්ථානයන් සහ විෂයයන් අතර සංකීර්ණ අන්තර් ක්‍රියාකාරීත්වයක් ප්‍රතිඵල මගින් පෙන්නුම් කරයි. නිගමනය මගින් ජනවාර්ගික අන්‍යන්‍යතා කාර්ය සාධනයේ සුක්ෂ්ම ස්වභාවය ඉස්මතු කරයි, එහිදී විෂය ආස්ථානයන් සහ ආත්මීයත්වයන් එකිනෙක බැඳී ඇති අතර, පුද්ගලයන් සමාජ සන්දර්භය තුළ ඔවුන්ගේ අන්‍යන්‍ය අන්‍යන්‍යතාවය සැරිසැරීම, සමස්තයක් වශයෙන්, ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ චීන සංක්‍රමණිකයන් අතර වාර්ගික අන්‍යන්‍යතා කතිකාවේ සංකීර්ණත්වය අවබෝධ කර ගැනීමට මෙම අධ්‍යයනය දායක වේ.

**Keywords:** *Sri Lankan Chinese Immigrants, Performing identity, Sociolinguistic analysis, Situated and situational identities, Subject position, Subjectivities*

**Introduction**

Immigrants of Chinese origin have been travelling to Sri Lanka over centuries and established residences for multifarious reasons. Especially, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an influx of Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia who either intended to remit money or return to China after engaging in arduous labour in exile (Zhang et.al. 2021). Identifying the characteristics of these immigrants, Xing and Sen (2013) postulate that “the number of Chinese immigrants continued to grow in the first four decades of the twentieth century, especially due to civil wars and the Japanese invasion of China” (p 207) and most of them who settled in Sri Lanka were “skilled and unskilled labourers...[sic]some of them worked on the ships and others in the poor neighborhoods of large port cities” (p 207). Rodrigo (1998) posits that a significant portion re-migrated from India and the majority among them had not attained higher education and possessed literacy solely in Chinese. The two types of immigrants that she identifies are the *hua quio* and the *hua shang*: *Hua quio*, the sojourners who remained loyal to China in their hearts promoting Chinese language, education and supporting motherland in any way they could and *Hua shang*, the traders and artisans who went abroad to set up bases at ports, mines or trading cities which are generally known as China towns. The latter being the kind who made their way to Sri Lanka came to inhabit occupational niches, especially in areas such as carpentry, dentistry, and silk

trade (Goswami & Malik, 2019) and Rodrigo adds to the list: “gem dealers, show makers and hotel runners” (Denham 1912 cited in Rodrigo, 1998, p. 232).

The identity of the South Asian Chinese immigrants has recently been problematized by Zhang et. al. (2021) by stating that by engaging in business ventures such as the silk trade, they have marginalized themselves to occupy a “middle position” which is also reflected in their livelihood where they act as the link between the producer and the customer. They further pin down this self-imposed intermediary position to a cultural belief: “the shot hits the bird that pokes its head out” (Zhang et.al., 2021). Just as much as the silk traders, the dental technicians also perform an intermediary role between the customer and the dental surgeon. This is also what Rodrigo (1998) problematizes as “visible invisibility”. Similarly, a socio-historical study of Dhammadinna (2021) records that the Sri Lankan Chinese, who were conferred citizenship in 2009, have not been able to preserve their ethnic identity.

Immigrant identity, as explored by Bhabha (1994) is inherently hybrid and fluid, and perhaps shaped by the intersection of homeland traditions and host culture influences. It is even distorted characterizing a relationship defined by domination, alienation, and internal conflict (Memmi, 2021). Immigrants occupy a “third space,” a conceptual arena where cultural meanings are negotiated and transformed, challenging the binaries of native and foreigner. This hybridity destabilizes notions of cultural purity, revealing identity as a dynamic and evolving process. Immigrants often experience ambivalence, navigating between belonging and exclusion, while also acting as cultural translators who reinterpret norms and values across systems. This process underscores their role in disrupting fixed national identities, exposing the fragility of dominant cultural narratives, and contributing to the innovation and empowerment of marginalized voices.

Therefore, this study examines the discourse of the identity performance of Sri Lankan second generation Chinese immigrants. As identities are multiple and complex at any given time, this paper examines the Chinese

immigrant identity as a site of negotiation of meaning making expressed through subjectivities and subject positions. Also, this paper attempts to identify how these immigrants are *doing* their identity discursively which led to the following three questions:

- 1) How do the Chinese immigrants identify themselves in the context that they live in?

Here, I examine the identity labels and the negotiation of these labels while describing themselves as the second and first-generation migrants against the others.

- 2) How do the Chinese immigrants position themselves in describing themselves and each other and what linguistic devices are used for this?

Here, I analyze the subject positions and subjectivities while identifying the use of linguistic devices such as nomination and predication strategies.

- 3) How is *doing* Chinese immigrant identity discursively (co)constructed and negotiated?

Through this question, I explore how Chinese immigrants become who they are by their language practices and behaviours.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **The Nexus Among Identity, Language and Performance**

Identity, which is one of the most problematized terms due to the multiplicity of meaning it conveys, has been historically applied to refer to the essentialist identity labels based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality or nationality (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). This sense of identification is limited in scope and even instrumental in establishing oppressive practices such as governmentality (Foucault, 1922 as cited in Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) but often occurs in concurrence with psychodynamic processes which involve emotionally connecting with others. Hence, Calhoun (1993 as cited in Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) posits that “categorical modes of identification” are as important as

relational modes of identification. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) clarify that categorical identification, also known as 'situated identities' in Gonçalves (2013), as an identity construct within linguistic anthropology that cannot be detached from "as long as it has salience in the lives of the speakers we study" (Gonçalves (2013, 375-376).

Moreover, identity is about informing oneself and the other in both construction of subjectivities and subject positions. As Levon (2010) identifies, subjectivities are ontological states and are dependent on inner psychological identifications that would incorporate the "thoughts, sentiments and embodied sensibilities, and, especially, their sense of self and self-world relations" (Holland & Leander, 2004 as cited in Lührman, 2006) often manifesting a subject's emotional experience in political struggle (Ortner, 2005 as cited in Lührman, 2006). Conversely, a subject position is a "locations with a conversation. They are the identities made relevant by specific ways of talking" (Edley, 2001, 210). Once someone adopts a specific position as their own, they naturally perceive the world from the perspective of that position, using the specific images, metaphors, narratives, and ideas that are pertinent within the particular discourse they are situated in. They are also "dynamic" and evolving clusters of norms and expectations (Gonçalves, 2013) and people use positions to perform or reject a story line in varied ways. Thereby it is shown that positions are fluid, dynamic and are always constructed in particular contexts. Gonçalves (2013) identifies this as "situational identities" as opposed to situated identities which are "essentialized".

In order to conceptualize how identity takes social meaning, it is imperative to establish a correlation between identity and language. Language is an important way people are read and it is also a tool to think about one's identity: Hence the centrality conferred to identity in linguistic anthropology (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Examining the nexus between language and identity, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) highlight that in cultural production of identity, language is the most flexible and pervasive. It is by using language that people

constitute themselves to belong to a group and through this labeling process they inform the performance of certain identity category. As Eckert and Mc.Connell-Ginnet (1992) argue, one must examine how the labels for identity categories translate to social practices. In similar theorizing, identity is studied as a semiotic process “consisting of a sign, object and an interpretative” (Kockelman, 2006, 20). While the relationship between the sign and the signed is arbitrary, the correlation between the sign and the signified explained through an interpretant leads to the current understanding of identity being multiple, capturing the complexity of human thought and behaviour.

Agha (2003) formulating a structure that elucidates the connection between social meanings and linguistic selections, argues that these selections can be perceived as distinct varieties. Central to this framework are two crucial notions: indexicality and enregisterment (Johnstone, 2016). Due to complexity of human identities, they can be indexed through different cultural, social and other contextually relevant phenomena. She foregrounds that:

A sign is indexical if it is related to its meaning by virtue of co-occurring with the thing it is taken to mean. When we hear thunder, we often experience lightning, rain and a darkening sky, so the sound of thunder may lead us to expect a storm.... enregisterment refers to ‘processes and practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population.’ (Johnstone, 2016, 284)

Indexicality according to Hoinkes (2019) is a sign that, based on its nature, can signify a purely normative and uninformative connection to the object, like a fixed and designated name. As such the “relationship between the index and the object is not only interpretative, but also real in some form...there is a direct index-object relation within the semiotic structure” (Hoinkes, 2019, 2). While ethnic labels index belonging to a certain language and speech group, they also index the performance of the said ethnic group within a certain social milieu. These labels according to Eckert and Mc.Connell-Ginnet (1992) are

restrictive as they must be in that social category in everyday activities and attributes while participating in social practice. Enregisterment, closely related to indexicality, is a process in which certain linguistic variations become differentiable within a language as a socially identifiable register of forms (Agha, 2003). That is, registers start emerging when several indexical relationships begin to be seen as related and registers turn into nameable, describable objects when people orient toward them. Thus, a distinct speech form becomes socially recognized or enregistered as indexical of speaker attributes by a certain group of language users. Extending this theorization to behavioural patterns, Agha (2003) states that these enregistered identities are oriented towards certain social groups, living space and shared experiences of time (Hoinkes, 2019).

Drawing a nexus between identity and performance, Clammer (2015) states that “performance is essentially the creation, presentation or affirmation of an identity (real or assumed) through action”. For example, in identity creation and maintenance, performance encompasses communicating a signal to others and even yourself and therefore, a person has the ability to enact or embody different identities such as being a teacher and a mother in a seamless manner. In that sense, teaching and being a mother are performances which are dependent on temporality and spatiality. Just as much as identity construction is governed by hegemonic practices where “stylized repetition of actions” recurs (Butler, 1988), Bucholtz and Hall (2004) posit that identity performance is also steeped in political ideology and those who occupy the margins constantly seek to subvert hegemony so that some recognition and validation can be gained for themselves. Therefore, identity performance using language can also be subversive and resistant (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004).

### **Methodology, Sampling, Data Collection Tools**

For this qualitative emic pilot study, sociolinguistic interview was used as a means of eliciting data. In the form of casual conversation conducted in Sri Lankan English and Sinhala languages, which were the speakers’ vernacular, the

construction of the immigrant hybrid identities against national imaginings, power dynamics and social relationships were examined. An outcome of the study is to bridge the gap between immigrants' recognition of their own identities and how literature portrays them, ensuring that the fluid and hybrid nature of immigrant identities challenges fixed and monolithic portrayals.

The interviews were semi structured and included themes that would elicit information on origins, cultural practices, language use and belonging. A non-probability sampling technique known as snowball sampling was employed to select participants. Each interview, lasting one hour, was conducted with the consent of the participants and was audio recorded for subsequent transcription. As part of a project titled Discourse Communities conducted in the Faculty of Humanities, University of Kelaniya, four interviews were conducted with three male and one female dental technician: two in English and the other two in Sinhala.

All interviewees- C, B, Y and Z- are established dental technicians who have followed the professional paths of their fathers. Their ages ranged from 40-60 and they were interviewed in the form of narrative inquiry at their work premises. According to Rogers (2007), narratives "play a key role in the construction of self and identity" (100). As such, narrative inquiry was selected as the tool of data gathering and the interviewees were asked to narrate their lived experiences.

The limiting of interviews to four participants is substantiated foregrounding Davies and Harré's (1990) "immanentist point of view": the language that we use has a culturally motivated history and the words that we use in speaking are never original, but it is a quoting of voices that have come before us either aligning or disaligning ourselves with the set of histories and associations that are linked to socially relevant voices (Bakhtin, 1984). Davies and Harré (1990) argue that it is the "actual conversations which have already occurred that are the archetypes of current conversations" (2).

Inspired by Gonçalves's (2010) work on migrant identity building

discourse, this study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to discursively analyze hybrid identity performance thematically.

In analyzing subject positions, both nomination strategies such as membership categorization devices, deictics, metaphors, metonymies, and verbs and nouns that denote processes and actions are used alongside predication strategies such as adjectives, appositions, prepositional phrases, subordinate clauses, adverbs, collocations, comparisons, and idioms.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***To be or not to be Chinese: Negotiating Hybrid Identities***

In all interviews the respondents highlighted their hybrid identity referring both to the primordial identity claim Chinese and Sri Lankan as well as local ethnic groups. B is explicit about his ethnic origins and claims to belong to the *Hun race* (line 8) and *Huaren* (line 8).

2 B: we have to be properly identified. we are called *huayi*- chinese or yellow people born in another country.

3 we are the second or third generation migrants. my uncle who is born outside sri lanka is called *huaqiao*:

4 These are the ones who are currently arriving in Sri Lanka. there is a large community of *huaqiao* now.

*Lines omitted.*

8 we are of the hun race, so there is no difference. we are the *huaren*, the yellow people.

Yet, he articulates his connectedness to the Sinhalese through the matrilineal heritage. In most cases, it was Chinese males who sought immigration due to challenging conditions in China and started families eventually marrying local women. Later, contrary to his previous claim, B demonstrates a bias towards the Sinhalese identity, because he says:

16 B: although my friends call me B I am like (.)and all my friends are Sinhalese. In line 16, B is lost for words and pauses. The pause functions as a display of

discomfort in admitting that he is *like Sinhalese*. Therefore, in the second pair part, he adds that his friends are Sinhalese as a substitute for the word he did not utter. Here, contextualized in a Sinhala way of life, he taps into the homogenizing effect of cultures when they are put together. Said (1978) posits that in immigrant situations cultures “overlap, borrow from each other”. Similarly, C signals hybrid identity referring to ethnic identity labels such as Chinese, Sinhala and Malay intersecting with religious identity labels such as Christian, Buddhist and Muslim and language labels Sinhala, Tamil, English, Chinese and Sri Lankan Malay which are key to his identity.

14 C: no no no so we were mixed. you know mixed family we spoke to my father in Chinese.

Line omitted

16 I spoke to my mother in Malay (.) so my father and mother spoke in English (.) so my neighbor on the left side

17 was a Tamil, whereas the neighbor on the right side was a Sinhalese. so we were well versed in five languages

18 because we didn't feel it. We celebrated Ramazan as well as Christmas.

Informing about her parentage, Z introduces her father as *Chinese* and mother as *Sri Lankan*. Immediately afterwards, she discloses that her mother is from Kandy, which in Sri Lankan discourse has an elevated position, indexing authenticity of belonging to the country, a notion that came into existence during the colonial occupation where Kandyan kingdom held back foreign invasion for centuries. Kandy signals an “unbroken cultural tradition of pre-colonial Sri Lanka” (Silva 2017, 155) where the occupants were perceived as untainted, respectable people. She further cements this idea by using the term *udarata/upcountry* (line 6), explaining the ontological reality of the social divisions in society, “low country” and “upcountry” where the latter is considered more prestigious in comparison to the former.

4 Z: අම්මා Sri Lankan. (line omitted)

6 අම්මා Kandy උඩරට එක්කෙනෙක්.

English translation

4 Z: mother is Sri Lankan. (line omitted)

6 mother is from Kandy (.) Udarata person.

These situated nationality related identity labels reveal the contesting hierarchies within the local and global discourses, and they are used by the informants to negotiate the second-generation Chinese immigrant identity. In a competing hierarchical trajectory, *Chinese* indexes an affinity to an economic superpower and all informants refer to this current power dynamic China enjoys in a global power grid. Similarly, C invokes the superlative adjective phrase “number one” when referring to his Chinese identity. However, the informants’ exigency to authenticate their Sri Lankan, especially the Sinhala, heritage seems to unfold within the same contesting local and global discourse. Hence, the Sri Lanka identity is claimed either referring to the matrilineal heritage-either through mothers or wives- with Kandyan lineage. In the case of Z, when describing her Sri Lankan heritage, she trans languages from Sinhala to the English language: *Sri Lankan* (line 4) and *Kandy* (line 6), instead of using the Sinhala words. I argue that translanguaging from Sinhala to English, the prestigious hegemonic language that signals upward social mobility (Parakrama, 2012) augments her already elevated position within the global arena with the use of Chinese and the Kandy -*udarata* identities.

**Positioning Generational Identities: different *them* vs different and better *us***

The narratives of second-generation migrants, who are native to the local culture, encapsulate a generational disjunction. Y, addressing the first generation as *ඒගෙඒලො (they)* and the second as *අපි (we)* positioned the former

as all-rounders that would include being worriers, soldiers, cooks, tailors, sailors, businessmen and skilled workers.

- 1 Y: අපි වගේ නෙමේ ඒගොල්ලො හැමදේම දන්නවා .අපේ පරණ generation එකේ කවිටියට උයන්න
- 2 පුළුවන් මහන්න පුළුවන්... . Fight කරගන්න පුළුවන් ගොඩක් ඒවා .අපේ dada ලා worriers ලා හොඳට
- 3 fight කරන්න හොඳට දන්නවා එයා fight කරන්න දන්නවා එයා Japanese war එක කාලේ එහෙම ටිකක්

*Lines omitted.*

- 6 මෙයා හරි සැරයි මමත් දන්නවා ජේ සාමාන්‍ය ජීවිතයේදීත් මෙයා ටිකක් ටිකක් tough.

*English Translation*

- 1 Y: Unlike us, they know everything. The people of the old generation knew how to cook well,
- 2 sew and fight... many things. My dada belonged to the worrier (clan). They know how to
- 3 fight well. He knew how to fight. During the Japanese war

*Lines omitted*

- 6 He is very stern, even in personal life he is very tough.

Similarly, Z, while identifying her father as a “foreigner” who is unable to speak fluent Sinhala indexes an exigency to assimilate to the local hegemonic language, Sinhala.

- 2 Z: සිංහල නමා. ඒගොල්ලෝ සිංහල කතාකරන්නේ Foreignersලා foreign අය අර අර Foreignersලා කතා කරද්දී
- 3 පොඩ්ඩක් කැ (.) භාෂාව අපිට තේරෙනවා සිංහල කතා කරද්දී ටිකක් අමාරුයි තේරුම්ගන්න

4 සිංහල කතා කරන්නේ. ඉඳලා භිටලා Chinese කතා කරා. ඒ උනාට අපින් එක්ක කතා කරේ සිංහලෙන් නමා.

English translation

2 Z: Sinhala. they spoke in Sinhala like foreigners, that that that way foreigners speak

3 in a bit b (.) we understand the language. When speaking English it is difficult to understand.

4 speak in Sinhala. Once in a while spoke Chinese. but spoke with us in Sinhala

In this passage, she pauses and swallows a word that describes her father's speech mannerism. Ironically, while highlighting her father's foreignness for the inability to speak Sinhala, she uses an English word to describe it. I posit that in her reluctance to further alienate him by acknowledging that he speaks broken Sinhala (line 3), she alleviates her father's "foreignness" by translanguaging to English. Thus, she is navigating linguistic ideologies, *vis a vis* boundaries and borders. Instead of using the Sinhala counterpart *suddo* සුද්දො, she draws on the sociolinguistic belief system that the English term elevates one's social status, which might otherwise have diminished her father's social standing. In other words, this linguistic strategy allows one the space to express feelings in one language that would not be socially and culturally acceptable

Even C, who strongly articulates about his ethnic hybridity distances himself from the first-generation Chinese identity by denying the stereotypical food habits of the Chinese.

40 C: So even now some people come and ask me, are you eating worms, are you eating snakes?

41 I say there are Chinese who eat, but i don't eat.

He uses the personal deixis *I* to distinguish himself from the 'situated identity', Chinese. Thereby he indexes a more refined identity informed by the local

cultural praxis.

In the interview, C positions the itinerant Chinese as “survivors” and as ones who “played safe” framing the first-generation immigrants as being heroic but cautious.

- 1 C: No, we always got on well with the majority race because, you know, my father always said one
- 2 reason why he came here and thought of settling down in sri lanka is he said normally the sinhala people
- 3 are generally okay. you can survive. You can, you can, they (.) they are very friendly sort. Only thing is we
- 4 should not live with the majority.

In this extract, he indexes transnationality and itinerant subject position of the Chinese immigrants highlighting the need of a home for *settling down* (in line 2). Moreover, homelessness, marginal victimhood and their adaptability are indicated using the modal and the verb *can survive* (in line 3). In the interviews all four informants reiterated that their fathers’ generation were victims of an economic recession in China in the 1940s.

Moreover, the passage is reflective of the transgenerational knowledge transfer that has allowed these immigrants to acculturate and assimilate better into the social fabric. For example, referring to his father’s sentiments, C positions himself as the reporter not the speaker by using collectivizing personal deixis, *you* (line 3). Then, he juxtaposes it with the collectivizing personal deixis, *they*, the Sinhalese, indexing an indirect attitude report (Köder & Maier, 2017). Consequently, using *we*, a nomination strategy of spatialization (line 4), he shares the responsibility of the claim that he just made with his father: Chinese immigrants should be separated from the majority race. This one the one hand is a warning to be cautious of the Sinhalese, positioning them as being ‘somewhat hostile’ (they are *generally OK* -line 3), both he and his father agree on the importance of coexisting while being unique towards one’s own ethnic

identity. Using these language strategies, first creating a disjunction between the generations, they signal an inter-generational transmission of intuitiveness.

### **Performing Citizenship through Language**

Globally, a situated identity, in this case *Chinese*, is not only indexical of an ethnicity but also a phenomenon that involves a speech community (Bloomfield, 1933 as cited in Agha, 2005) - “a group of people who interact by means of speech” (42). In fact, language is a means of social communication and a means of creating social identity (Agha, 2005). However, the second-generation migrants due to assimilation no longer speak Chinese and have adopted the local languages, mainly Sinhala and English. Y’s iterations highlight a major concern that threatens his Chinese ethnic identity:

Y: Language එක තියෙන්නෙ එපෑ වයිනිස් වෙන්න.

#### *English translation*

Y: you must have the Chinese language to be Chinese.

His expresses, problematically, Chinese immigrant identity to be fixed, stable and unchanging. However, as a minority ethnic group who lives within a Sinhala Buddhist hegemony (Rambukwella, 2018) which also places English as the cultural capital and symbol privilege and power (Kandiah, 2010), it is inevitable that these dominant cultures “impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be” (Said, 1978, 68). While Y’s declaration signals a sense of loss of a language, it is also indicative of the possibility of being something new-a Sri Lankan Chinese- moving beyond the fixed *Chinese* identity. Just as the body and embodiment are important for creation, perception and social meaning making, language too produces body, because it is through language that a person enters “the sociocultural realm as a site of semiosis,

through cultural discourses about bodies as well as linguistic practices of bodily regulation and management” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016,173). In other words, it is pertinent to question how Chinese speaker’s body, in Sri Lanka called චීනා/*Cheena* (*‘tʃi:n a:*), is created in the manner which they speak. In the case of Y, he parodies his father’s speech style, just the way the Sinhalese person does.

- 9 Y: මෙයා ගේ කතා විලාශය ටිකක් වෙනස්නේ dada ගේ කතා විලාශය සිංහලෙන් කතා කරන්න අපහසුයි ඕක දැකලා
- 10 නියෙනවා එක්කෙනෙක් ඇවිල්ලා ඉවරවෙලා එක්කෙනෙක් අහල ඒ කියන දේ ආ තන්දි තානුවේ නේද නේද කියලා
- 11 ඉවර වෙලා අහල නියෙනවා වෙන සිංහල එක්කෙනෙක් අහල නියනවා ඒ කියන්නේ අපේ dada කියන ස්වරයෙන් තමා

*English translation*

- 9 Y: His style of speaking was different, dada’s style of speaking difficult to speak in Sinhala. seeing the incident
10. He had asked “ ah thandi thanuwe neda” (the thugs are in the gutter) in
- 11 Sinhala. He had asked imitating the way dada spoke. (laugh)

What is highlighted in Y’s parodic narration is the inability of the first generation Chinese immigrant to produce standard Sinhala pronunciation: he substitutes “ච/ch (tʃ)” with “ත/th ( )”, “ඩ/d (d)” with “ද/dh ( )” and “ක/k (k)” with “ත /th( )”, creating a comedic effect to the listeners. It also indexes a sense of inauthenticity creating the persona of an incompetent and gullible individual. This persona is embedded in the Sri Lankan idiom කොණ්ඩෙ බැඳපු චීන්නුන්ට කියන්න/ *‘kɔndɛ ‘bɛndapɔ ‘tʃi:nnuntə ‘kijɒnnə* (go tell a Chinaman with a ponytail). While this idiom axiomatically marginalizes individuals of Chinese ethnic descent due to their physical features, it also draws upon historical narratives that depict Chinese immigrants as itinerant salesmen who were persistent

despite their lack of knowledge of the local languages.

Y, in his parodic utterance of his father’s speech style, I argue, creates an opposition between himself and the persona associated with this term චීනා/*Cheena* (*ʔfi:n a:*). In this voicing, his speech characterizes vari-directional voicing (Bakhtin, 1984). As Levon (2012) states:

“Unlike its unidirectional counterpart, var-idirectional voicing does not involve a performative alignment between the speaker and the persona indexed through the act of speaking. Rather, vari-directional voicing is a form of distancing via comparison, a way for a speaker to layer a socially salient voice over her own in order to demonstrate the OPPOSITION between the two” (196).

Therefore, I hypothesize, meta linguistically, this as enregisterment of the Chinese speech: the enregisterment that indexes the persona of චීනා/*Cheena* (*ʔfi:n a:*). Perhaps, it is the refutation of this persona, conflated with racialized body politics in popular media, provides the basis to the enactment of the hyper-masculinity oriental hero archetype that epitomized martial dexterity. As reported by Y, martial arts during this time were popularly known as “චීන අඩි/*cheena adi* (*ʔfi:nə 'ʌdi*)” and men of Chinese descent were expected to fight using this style.

74 Y: හැමකිසිසෙම මට එක්කෙනෙක් එන්නෑ ගහගන්න. මට එන්නෙ දෙන්නෙක් හරි තුන් දෙනෙක් හරි.

75 ඒගොල්ලන්ගෙ එහෙම තියනවා. මොකද ඒගොල්ලො හිතන්නේ මට පුළුවන්

76 ඒගොල්ලන්ට වඩා මට පුළුවන්. අපි යමක් දන්නවා කියලා.

English translation

74 Y: one person does not come to fight with me. They come in pairs or trios.

75 They have that (notion). Because they think I can.

76 I can (fight) better than them (.) we know something more than them.

Although Y's speaking style adheres to standard Sinhala articulation, he too embodies this oriental hero persona- a transgenerational transmission. However, Y's need to denounce these segregating body politics is clearly expressed when he spoke about the Chinese identity label චීන/ Cheena ('tʃi:n a:). Y claims:

75 Y: ඒක තේරුණා හම අපි මොකක්ද කරන්නේ අපි හදන්නේ හැමකිස්සෙම ඒ චීන බවෙන් මිදෙන්න දැන්

76 අදටත් මම රැවුල වචන්න එක හේතුවක් නමයි ඒක

English translation

1 Y: when you feel it what do we do we always try to overcome chineseness even today the reason that

2 I grow a beard is this reason

His embodied resistance towards this identity is perhaps even signified through his inability speak Chinese and complete assimilation to the local cultural practices including body politics. He claims, by growing a beard, he camouflages the Chinese ethnic features.

**Conclusion**

This pilot study that delves into the second-generation migrant hybrid identities of the Chinese immigrants in Sri Lanka identifies contesting situated identity labels used by the participants to construct an authentic identity for themselves. These situated identities such as Chinese (both first and second generation) interact, contest and intersect with the ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities prevalent in the host country. What is salient is how these identity labels after much contestation and negotiation, draw from the national and international sociocultural perceptions and ideologies to create hybrid and

a culturally salient but “superior to others” selves. As (Hawley 2015) argues, narrative autobiographies do allow, from a web of entanglements, us to choose the story that we tell. Perhaps, this indigenization as well as the archetypal heroization of the immigrant Chinese identity should be viewed as a rebuttal of stigma and oppression endured as a people without citizenship; i.e. in the spirit of Frantz Fanon who, arguing against anti-blackness- “a systemic negation of attributes of humanity” (Hawley 2015, 194), denies in an emancipatory manner the shackles of history so that he can “endlessly creating [*sic*] himself” (193). In examining how these categorical identities translate into social practices, linguistic performance is key. Especially, apart from years of cultural assimilation affecting their indigenous language praxis, the hypothesized enregistered Chinese voice- with its not so fluent Sinhala pronunciation, prompt the second generation to distance themselves from this derogatory persona- චීනා/ *Cheena* ('tʃi:n a:). This too, I argue, draws from the oriental hero persona adept in martial arts steeped in “American ideology of individualism” (Coole et.al. 2012,3) is tapped into so that they can be more than the local, more than the international, better than both- archetypes of transnational Chinese “heroes”.

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