

Writing identity at the margins: a study on cultural adaptation and ethnic identity reconstruction among Chinese diaspora in emerging immigrant narratives

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Abstract. This study explores how second-generation Chinese immigrants in Australia reconstruct their cultural identities through creative writing. Thirty participants created narrative essays in English and continuously recorded reflective journals in a four-week writing workshop, followed by in-depth interviews. The analysis reveals two major linguistic strategies—code-switching and mixed metaphor—as well as two major thematic paradigms—cultural nostalgia and responding to stereotypes. Quantitative data show that, on average, there are 4.7 code-switches per article, and the use of metaphors spans dimensions such as food culture, natural images, family rituals, and urban memories. From a qualitative perspective, the authors describe creative writing as an enabling space: not only does it confirm bilingual capacity and coordinate double attribution, but it also helps resist simplified stereotypes. The structured and flexible reflection workshop provides a platform to revisit family legends, reconstruct the legacy narrative, and promote intergenerational dialogue. Research findings indicate that writing practice not only records the cultural adaptation and identity reconstruction of distinct groups, but also actively participates in shaping them. Pedagogical implications include integrating native language resources and cultural writing prompts into reading and writing classes to help diverse learners express their complex identities. Future studies can extend this framework to other immigrant communities and track its long-term impact on cultural confidence and social integration.

Keywords: Chinese diaspora, writing identity, code-switching, mixed metaphors, cultural nostalgia

1. Introduction

The wave of global immigration has created an increasingly diverse society, among which the second-generation immigrants need to deal with the complex cultural landscape. Although they grew up in the culture of the destination, they are connected to their homeland through family inheritance and often face double pressure: they have to preserve the inherited traditions while integrating into the mainstream environment. Although a large number of studies have explored the issue of immigrant adaptation through oral history and visual arts, relatively few have focused on creative writing, the art of exploring identity. Writing, on the other hand, has unique advantages: it offers a space for reflection, allowing people to sort out internal dialogues, experiment with language blending, and reconcile the tension between native language habits and local contextual norms.

For the second-generation Chinese immigrants, writing entirely in English may obscure the cultural subtletia, while using only the mother tongue may limit the audience and social integration. Therefore, creative writing workshops that encourage code-switching and metaphorical expression can bridge the gap. Code-switching - strategically embedding native language words and phrases in English texts - enables authors to convey a sense of intimacy, challenge stereotypes and demonstrate bilingual initiative. Mixed metaphors derived from cultural customs, dietary traditions or family images further enrich the narrative by capturing hierarchical emotional experiences. These language strategies not only reflect bicultural reserves but also serve as tools for reconstructing ethnic identities in ways such as screening memories, reconstructing family legends, and critically examining heritage narratives [1].

This study recruited thirty Chinese youth born in Australia to participate in a four-week writing project. By analyzing narrative essays, reflective diaries and interview records, we aim to: (1) identify language markers in the process of cultural adaptation; (2) Track the path of ethnic identity reconstruction in writing; (3) Explore the teaching approach of integrating traditional language resources into reading and writing education. We believe that creative writing constitutes an active space

where diaspora youth can re-examine their self-awareness, rediscover hidden narratives, and shape a mixed identity that respects both the cultures of their ancestral origins and the places of residence.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theories of writing identity

The construction of a writing identity arises from the ongoing dialogue of multiple internal and external voices, each carrying its own history and authority. In a discrete group, the printed page becomes the field of expression where all parties compete—ancestral memories, parental expectations, peer feedback, and social norms all claim a place here. The writer deliberately chooses the tone, register, and narrative stance: when retelling childhood rituals, a familial and intimate narrative tone may be used; when reflecting on the same experiences, a rigorous academic style may be switched [2]. This code-switching between sounds gives rise to layers of text, revealing the overlapping traces of multiple utterances like a rewritten version. This type of hybrid writing can reveal the author's evolving self-perception: sometimes deeply rooted in traditions, sometimes searching for new connections in the culture of the destination. Ultimately, writing identity in this kind of context is neither static nor unique, but rather a fluid dialogue unfolding between multiple selves.

2.2. Cultural adaptation in diasporic contexts

As immigrant writers navigate the bicultural map, they develop linguistic libraries that freely draw on their native language and local languages. Code-switching is not only a stylistic modification but also a strategic action: inserting native language words and phrases can convey a sense of intimacy, identify group identity, or resist the pressure of complete assimilation. Participants acknowledged that the moment of “slipping” into their parents’ language while writing would bring a unique thrill and create empathetic moments that pure English could not achieve. Mixed metaphors further enrich the adaptation process. The author could compare herself to a “lantern that illuminates two worlds,” blending the shadows of the Mid-Autumn Festival with the urban night [3]. These metaphors carry complex emotions—they illuminate cultural pride and reflect the predicament of belonging. Using these mixed-language strategies, discrete group creators forge narratives that are neither fully embraced nor fully accepted, ultimately manifesting as the creative integration of dual cultures.

2.3. Ethnic identity reconstruction

The autobiography writing workshop created a structured and open space for young people from fragmented groups, allowing them to actively reshape their sense of self. By revisiting family legends—stories of migration, sacrifice, or struggle—participants awakened memories that may have gone untold or been misinterpreted. In these safe environments, writers are encouraged to question and reinterpret the narrative of inheritance: the experience of crossing the river described by the grandmother can become a metaphor for confronting cultural barriers in the present. A certain festival recipe can also become a symbol of intergenerational continuity. Using selective memory, participants emphasized moments of tenacity and joy, without avoiding complexities such as intergenerational conflict or language loss [4]. This thoughtful rewriting shapes an ethnic identity that respects tradition while taking into account personal experiences and dynamic cultural contexts. Subsequently, these reshaped identities give writers more autonomy to present themselves to their ethnic communities and to society at large.

3. Experimental methods

3.1. Participant recruitment

Thirty young adults participated in this study, all born in Australia and with at least one parent born in China. Recruitment took place at two metropolitan community centers known for offering cultural and language programs. The workshop host announced the project at the regular gathering and posted bilingual flyers on the bulletin board. Interested participants completed a short pre-screening questionnaire to confirm their age range (18–25 years), the frequency of narrative writing in English in the past six months (at least one piece), and their willingness to participate in the entire workshop and interview [5]. This conceptual sampling ensures diversity in genres, parental backgrounds (such as Cantonese, Mandarin), and previous writing experiences.

3.2. Data collection instruments

We collected three complementary types of data for each participant. First, a narrative essay in English of nearly 800 words on the theme of cultural self-expression. Second, participants continuously wrote reflective journals throughout the four-week

workshop, documenting their emotional responses to the writing process, moments of doubt or pride, and the evolution of their sense of identity. Finally, we conducted structured interviews with each participant lasting approximately one and a half hours [6]. Participants discussed their narrative choices, the motivations underlying certain linguistic features, and their responses to peer feedback. All documents were coded anonymously and kept confidential, and the original text was entered into qualitative security analysis software.

3.3. Analytical framework

The cross-validation process, which integrated discourse analysis and topic coding, is analyzed. Discourse analysis focuses on identifying code switching, metaphorical application, and narrative voice transformations (such as tense transitions or intonation changes from description to commentary). After identifying these language features, the topic analysis method helped extract the core issues among participants and label them “sense of belonging”, “nostalgia” and “fighting stereotypes [7].” Each theme is clearly defined by representative quotes and narrative paragraphs. The tripartite verification of essays, diaries, and interviews ensures the reliability of interpretation and continually refines the coding categories until no new topics emerge.

4. Experimental procedure

4.1. Narrative writing workshops

For four consecutive weeks, participants attended 90-minute workshops twice a week at the local community center. Each section began with a five-minute mindfulness practice—such as breathing exercises or imagery coaching—to help the writer enter a creative state. Warm-up activities led to freewriting based on sense memory, such as the aroma of jasmine tea in Grandma’s kitchen or the crackle of New Year’s fireworks. Then, the host teacher introduced a more structured theme: the first week focused on “Family Celebrations,” and the second week explored “Moments of Cultural Misunderstanding on Campus.” Participants were encouraged to freely experiment with forms, incorporating lyrics, proverbs, and even recipes, as long as these elements resonated with their personal heritage [8]. After twenty minutes of writing, participants formed groups of three, read the text aloud, and provided targeted feedback on clarity of expression, authenticity of language, and emotional impact. The facilitator rotated between groups and asked probing questions (“What does this image remind you of?”) or “How would other readers interpret this sentence?” Finally, they collectively examined how the specific language choice reflected cultural implications.

4.2. Interview protocol

Within seven days of the final workshop, each participant will have a 60-minute in-depth individual conversation with the interviewer. To build trust, the interview began with an open-ended question: “How did your understanding of identity change during the workshop?” The next question delves into the details of narrative decision-making: “What prompted you to switch from Chinese to English here?” and “How do you feel about telling your parents’ story [9]?” The interviewer adopted the method of active listening, repeating the participants’ expressions (“you seemed both proud and hesitant when you wrote that sentence”) and asking clarifying questions as needed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; text feedback checks participants for accuracy of emotional expression - including pride, nostalgia and even a sense of humor.

4.3. Data triangulation

To ensure the credibility and depth of the research, we advanced the interactive data verification in three stages. First, two researchers independently coded each participant’s narrative essays, reflective journals, and interview texts, initially marking elements such as “code switching”, “metaphor application” and “emotional tone.” Second, the research team compared the coding framework, examined points of divergence, and further defined them, for example, by classifying “family ritual metaphor” and “cultural symbol metaphor” into the higher category of “mixed metaphor.” The third stage involved conducting feedback interviews with ten participants, introducing comprehensive topics (such as “Intergenerational Dialogue” or “Cultural Resilience”) and asking about their degree of resonance. Participants offered refinement suggestions (a set of suggestions dividing “desire” and “nostalgia” to capture subtle emotional differences), which prompted us to update the thematic framework accordingly. This rigorous participant-led process ensures that the interpretation is rooted in real experiences and enhances the credibility of the overall finding [10].

5. Results and discussion

The analysis reveals two main linguistic strategies—code-switching and mixed metaphor—as well as two major thematic paradigms—cultural nostalgia and stereotype engagement—through which participants reshape their identities through writing.

First, code-switching has both functionality and emotional expressiveness. Functionally, integrating native language words and phrases into English narratives creates an intimate space, marking moments of deep emotional resonance. Emotionally, participants' descriptions of switching to Mandarin or Cantonese are like "drawing a curtain across the room," allowing them to highlight cultural subtleties that cannot be conveyed through English alone. The author noted in her journal that the act of switching affirmed bilingual capacity and eliminated feelings of linguistic shame. As shown in Table 1, participants used an average of 4.7 code-switches per piece, with a maximum of 9 in the longer narratives.

Table 1. CodeSwitching frequency per essay

Statistic	Value
Mean instances	4.7
Median instances	4.0
Range (min–max)	1 – 9
SD	2.1

Second, mixed metaphors have become creative bridges connecting different worlds. Metaphors evoking food traditions, natural images, and family rituals are particularly important. If one participant compares identity to a “dessert plate that brings together both savory and sweet flavors”, a single image encapsulates cultural integration. Another person describes themselves as “like a kite tied between two trees”, connecting traditional roots with current entanglements. These metaphors are like miniature narratives, condensing complex emotional scenes with vivid, culturally rooted imagery. Table 2 categorizes and presents the types and frequencies of metaphors observed throughout the prose.

Table 2. Distribution of mixed metaphor types

Metaphor Type	Frequency
Food-related	14
Nature-related	9
Family ritual	7
Urban heritage	4

The first thematic paradigm—cultural nostalgia—manifests as a deep memory of traditions and family experiences in the homeland. Participants often begin their articles with childhood clips: grandparents teaching calligraphy, the New Year's dragon dance, which lays an emotional foundation for exploring current identity tensions. However, the narrative is not limited to mourning the past, but rather turns to transforming reality: the authors describe how to reshape traditions in a mixed context, for example, by organizing mooncake-making workshops in schools.

The second paradigm—stereotype processing—involves explicit or implicit challenges to the stereotypical perception of the Chinese community in mainstream society. Some texts directly evoke prejudices—“No, I don't live in a pagoda”—while others deconstruct and simplify labels with humor or irony. In the interview, participants explained that writing about these stereotypes constitutes a form of resistance, transforming the experience of encountering prejudice into an opportunity for self-affirmation and community education.

Overall, writing has become a practical field of identity reconstruction. Participants strategically combine linguistic strategies with thematic content—as demonstrated by the data indicators in Table 1 and the distribution of metaphors in Table 2—to weave narratives that respect tradition, demonstrate initiative, and ultimately coordinate cultural belonging. These findings suggest that creative writing not only reflects the process of cultural adaptation of distinct groups, but also actively participates in its development.

6. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that creative writing workshops offer an effective platform for second-generation Chinese immigrants to reconstruct cultural identities. Through code-switching and mixed metaphors, participants created hybrid discourses that affirmed bilingual competence and mediated dual belonging. Thematic analyses of cultural nostalgia and stereotype resistance

revealed how writing enables both reflective longing and active challenges to reductive assumptions. Educationally, embedding heritage-language prompts and metaphorical exercises into curricula can empower diverse learners to articulate complex identities authentically. Future studies should apply this framework to other immigrant groups and investigate the long-term effects of narrative interventions on cultural confidence, social integration, and intergenerational dialogue.

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