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The Positioning and Negotiation of Ethnic Identities for Young Chinese Immigrants in an Australian Context

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ABSTRACT: *This exploratory pilot study examines how three young Chinese immigrants in Melbourne negotiate their ethnic identities. Using semistructured interviews and thematic analysis within a positioning theory framework, we examined participants' dual cultural perspectives. Three interrelated themes emerged: linguistic positioning, peer/community belonging, and intergenerational expectations. Participants described hybrid, hyphenated identities and fluidly navigated between Chinese heritage and Australian culture. They balanced language skills and diaspora networks to affirm their heritage, while everyday social interactions sometimes signaled outsider status, highlighting tensions between family expectations and a sense of belonging. Our findings highlight the contextual, agentive nature of identity negotiation. This study contributes in-depth insight into the complex identity processes of young Chinese immigrants, with implications for multicultural understanding and immigrant integration.*

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Positioning Theory, Young Chinese Immigrants in Australia

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese immigration has become an increasingly significant global phenomenon (Liu, 2015a). As of 2020, approximately 10.5 million Chinese citizens were living abroad, making the Chinese diaspora one of the world's largest (Haugen & Speelman, 2022). Major destinations include the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. In Australia alone, approximately 600,000 residents are first-generation Chinese immigrants (ABS, 2024). Chinese migrants first arrived in large numbers during the mid-19th-century gold rush, but migration was later curtailed under the White Australia Policy (1901–1973). Since the 1970s, Chinese immigration has resumed primarily via skilled migration and through former international students obtaining permanent residency after completing their studies (Ang, 2014; Pan, 2018).

Although Chinese immigrants now span multiple generations (from the first to the fourth), relatively few studies have examined the sociocultural dimensions of their migration experience, particularly the positioning and negotiation of ethnic identity and heritage (Ang, 2014; Liu, 2015b). Recent cohorts of Chinese immigrants who gained permanent residency or citizenship through skilled and student pathways (especially between 2005 and 2019) are also underrepresented in research on culture shock, identity positioning, language barriers, and sociocultural adaptation and acculturation. Many of these immigrants have settled into careers and started families, and their children represent the "1.5-generation" (those who arrived in Australia under the age of 14) (Dune et al., 2021; Renzaho et al., 2017). The 1.5-generation of young Chinese immigrants is often described as living between two cultures, facing external labeling, intergenerational expectations, and cultural disconnection (Sonn et al., 2022; Fang, 2020). Their struggles are intensified by experiences of social exclusion, the pressure to learn English while maintaining Chinese as a heritage language, and other cultural stereotypes. These include encounters with racial discrimination, a lack of agency within schools and the community, and frustrations in maintaining ties to their Chinese heritage community. Second-generation Chinese Australians (born in Australia to Chinese immigrant parents) face similar identity negotiation challenges (van Heelsum & Koomen, 2016), as they are expected to uphold Chinese cultural and linguistic traditions (Shen & Jiang, 2021).

This paper addresses this gap in the literature. While identity negotiation among Chinese youth has been explored in other contexts, such as international study abroad (Yang & Du, 2025), few studies have focused specifically on how young 1.5-generation Chinese immigrants in Australia negotiate their ethnic identities. Previous research on Chinese migrants has primarily emphasized language learning, education, and general acculturation outcomes (Berry et al., 2006; Chiang & Yang, 2008; Shen & Jiang, 2021), often overlooking the nuanced identity negotiation processes of those who immigrated as children. However, this is a growing and vibrant community, and it is important to understand how these identity negotiation processes influence their psychological well-being, social integration, and sense of belonging in the Australian context. To explore these issues, we conducted a pilot qualitative case study with a small sample of three participants (Yin, 2017). These participants were young adults (aged 18–29) who arrived in Australia with their parents between the ages of 4 and 14, and all were enrolled in higher education at the time of study. Their unique trajectories provided in-depth insights into the sociocultural challenges they navigated – including cultural adaptation, language switching, and identity consolidation – as they balanced their Chinese heritage with Australian life. Semistructured interviews were used to capture their lived experiences, illuminating the pressures of parental expectations, educational environments, and peer cultures. Such factors proved significant in how they adapted, negotiated, and positioned themselves in terms of identity (as ethnic Chinese and as emerging Australian residents).

The interview data were analyzed thematically (Clarke & Braun, 2021) and interpreted through the lens of positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), which emphasizes how social and personal forces shape identity (Liu, 2017b; Li, 2023). This theoretical approach illuminates the complex, hybrid, and *hyphenated* nature of our participants' identities: they continually carry their ethnic Chinese heritage while cultivating an emerging Australian identity and sense of belonging. Interactions with both Chinese family traditions and local Australian culture were evident in their narratives, highlighting how their sense of belonging is simultaneously challenged and enriched by negotiating between these cultural worlds. Overall, our findings contribute to broader discussions of social and cultural acculturation in migrant communities by shedding light on how identity negotiation impacts the sociocultural adaptation of immigrant youth. This study offers insights into issues of social cohesion, inclusion, and the diversity of youth migrant identities in Australia (Ballantyne & Podkalicka, 2020; Glass et al., 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In line with the focus of this paper, existing scholarship has examined young immigrants' perspectives through diverse lenses. This section provides a focused synthesis of work on young immigrants of Asia, especially Chinese immigrants in Australia, with attention to identify negotiation and belonging. For 1.5-generation immigrants of Asian origin, age of arrival and growing up through host

country schooling were often treated as the key features that made their experiences distinctive: they typically retained partial memories, language practices, and family socialization from the country of origin while simultaneously developing everyday cultural competence in the host society through schooling, peer networks, and local institutions (Lee & Kim, 2020). Similarly, scholars have reported that many 1.5-generation immigrants navigated host-country cultural norms relatively fluently because early-arrival socialization and schooling increased linguistic access and familiarity with local interactional styles (Benyamin, 2018). However, research has also shown that both 1.5- and second-generation Asian youth still face ongoing challenges in negotiating ethnic identity and belonging, particularly when they encounter competing cultural expectations across home and host contexts (Chiang & Yang, 2008).

In the Australian context, Fang (2020) reported that some young Asian and Chinese immigrants described themselves as in-between two worlds, home and host cultures, where identity was shaped by parenting practices, family socialization, engagement with ethnic and mainstream communities, and openness to host-country peer cultures (Chiang & Yang, 2008; Fang, 2020). At the same time, research on achievement discourses showed that Chinese-background youth were frequently framed through model minority expectations in schooling, which could amplify pressure, intensify stress, and complicate educational and career choices (Malik, 2004). Studies have also reported dilemmas associated with hyphenated identities (e.g., Chinese Australian) and with bicultural or hybrid identifications among youth with Asian backgrounds, reflecting the ongoing work of negotiating and cultural positions rather than choosing a single identity (Asghari-Fard & Hossain, 2017; Ma, 2019; Sonn et al., 2022). Within these accounts, identity positioning was often sustained by connections to ancestral cultures (e.g., family language, foodways, values).

Across contexts, scholars have consistently treated family as a primary influence on young immigrants' ethnic identity development (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2013). Juang and Syed (2010) explained that ethnic identity was closely tied to family cultural commitments and socialization within ethnic communities. Research on "parental ethnic identification" and parenting styles further showed that parents' own cultural orientations and practices shaped children's ethnic identity trajectories (Li, 2011; Chen et al., 2014; Smetana, 2017). For example, Chen et al. (2014) found that supportive and structured parenting practices were associated with children's cultural adaptation. At the same time, studies have reported that intergenerational conflict is common in immigrant families when expectations about identity, autonomy, and cultural continuity diverge; such tensions could challenge parental authority (Bishop & Medved, 2020; Chen et al., 2022; O'Callaghan et al., 2023). Beyond family, research has indicated that visible markers such as appearance, language, religion, and cultural practice shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion for ethnic minority youth (Carlson & Hou, 2022). Peer relationships also feature prominently (Chin, 2014; Graham & Echols, 2018; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

Conceptually, ethnic identity is commonly defined as involving self-identification, belonging, and ethnic involvement (Phinney, 1990). External labels

can restrict identity and complicate belonging. (Van de Weerd, 2019). Studies on adaptation further reported that engagement with host-country cultural practices often supported social integration (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017). Heritage language maintenance anchored identity across transnational lives (Berry et al., 2006; Belford, 2022; Carlson & Hou, 2022).

In Australia, Chinese immigrant families navigated multiple forms of identification, including Chinese, Australian Chinese, and Chinese Australian (Liu, 2015b). Ang (2022) used the concept of "Chineseness" to discuss diasporic experiences and the ways cultural identity could be enacted through language, traditions, practices, and everyday life. Related work has suggested that "Chineseness" operated not only through tangible cultural markers (e.g., food, language) but also through community participation, including festivals and social-cultural activities in local Chinese networks (Liu et al., 2019; Pan, 2018). Other research highlighted the nuances of dual identities, showing that Chinese Australians often balanced heritage and host cultural repertoires and made context-dependent choices about how they described themselves (Li, 2023; Liu, 2017).

Despite these foundations, focused research on ethnic identity negotiation among young Chinese immigrants in Australia remains limited. Broader migration scholarship has established that immigrant-origin youth frequently navigate sociocultural challenges that shape identity and adjustment (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018; Kiang et al., 2022), and studies have suggested that conflicting cultural expectations could negatively affect psychological well-being (Dune et al., 2021; Kim & Agee, 2019; Liu, 2015b; Spector et al., 2017). At the level of higher education and intercultural transition, work in the Journal of International Students also underscored that belonging was relational and institutionally shaped, with intercultural encounters affecting students' academic and social experiences (Cena et al., 2021; Mohamad, 2024). While these higher-education studies often focused on international students, they sharpened the conceptual relevance of belonging, recognition, and intercultural negotiation, processes that also mattered for young migrants who moved early and then completed schooling and university in Australia.

Taken together, prior studies have suggested that many Chinese-background youth developed hyphenated or bicultural identities that reflected both constraint and agency: they negotiated family expectations, responded to peer norms and public labeling, and drew on heritage practices to sustain continuity while participating in Australian educational and social life (Liu, 2015a; Liu et al., 2020; Martin & Nakayama, 2018). However, the situated meanings of "Chineseness," the microprocesses of positioning in everyday interaction, and the ways these processes intersect with sense of belonging among Chinese Australians remain underexamined (Benyamin, 2018; Park, 2021). This paper therefore aimed to deepen the understanding of identification, ethnic identity, and sociocultural positioning among this underexplored cohort.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Positioning theory distinguishes between personal positioning (presenting oneself as an agent) and moral positioning (aligning with social expectations). It has been used to analyze how identities are constructed through discourse and social interaction. The social and cultural context is also critical: Western individualistic cultures emphasize independence, whereas Asian collectivistic cultures stress interdependence and familial roles (Mau, 2004). Collectivist communities often encourage conformity to family and cultural expectations.

Identity is not static but shifts dynamically through interactions with family, peers, and society (Baert, 2012). Positioning theory provides a framework to explore migrants' self-perceptions and how others perceive them across cultural contexts (Lawson, 2017). In this study, positioning theory is applied to understand how our participants negotiate their ethnic identities via family relationships, ethnic and cultural ties, and transnational sociocultural experiences. We highlight how they position themselves both individually and within their family and community and how these positions inform their identity negotiations.

METHOD

This study employed an exploratory pilot qualitative case study design (Yin, 2017) to examine how young Chinese immigrants in Melbourne negotiated ethnic identity through everyday talk, relationships, and experiences of belonging. The study was deliberately interpretive and exploratory, prioritizing depth of understanding and analytic insight over statistical generalization (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2017). Pilot qualitative studies are commonly used to refine research questions, protocols, and analytic categories ahead of larger-scale work, particularly when the topic involves complex, context-dependent identity processes (Cena et al., 2021).

The participant size ($N = 3$) was small, and the manuscript treated this as a pilot rather than a basis for broad population claims. The analytic aim was to generate case-based insight into identity negotiation across generational positions (1.5- and second-generation) and to test the fit of positioning theory as an interpretive lens (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). In qualitative inquiry, adequacy is judged by the study's purpose and the richness of the material rather than numerical representativeness (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2017). The revised manuscript therefore framed findings as *situated and illustrative* and used them to inform the next stage of a larger program of research.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling (Patton, 2002) based on accessibility and relevance to the research focus. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) Chinese background, (b) aged 20–29, (c) currently residing in Melbourne, and (d) either 1.5-generation (arrived in Australia as a child/adolescent) or second-generation (born in Australia to Chinese immigrant parents). The final sample included two 1.5-generation and one second-generation participant.

Data were generated through semistructured interviews (Patton, 2015), lasting approximately 45–50 minutes each. Interviews took place in Melbourne in a quiet, mutually agreed-upon setting (e.g., private meeting space or online videoconference), with language choice determined by participant preference (English or Mandarin) to support comfort and expressive nuance. Interviews followed a flexible guide organized around four domains aligned with the research questions and positioning theory: cultural belonging, ethnic labeling, intergenerational expectations, and peer influence on identity formation.

Example interview questions included:

"How do you describe yourself (e.g., Chinese, Australian, Chinese Australian)? Why?"

"Can you describe a time you felt you belonged (or did not belong) in Australia?"

"How do your parents' expectations shape how you see yourself?"

"Have you ever been labeled by others (e.g., 'not Chinese enough'/'not Australian')? How did you respond?"

"Do you change how you present yourself in different settings (family, university, workplace)?"

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English where needed. Pseudonyms were used throughout.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2021). Analysis proceeded in four steps. First, the first author completed familiarization through repeated reading and analytic memoing. Second, initial coding was conducted using a combination of inductive codes (emerging from the data) and sensitizing concepts drawn from positioning theory (e.g., self-positioning, other-positioning, moral positioning) (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Third, codes were clustered into candidate themes, which were reviewed against the full dataset and refined for internal coherence and distinctiveness. Finally, themes were defined and written up with attention to how participants' identity claims shifted across contexts.

Ethical procedures included informed consent, confidentiality protections, and careful attention to cultural sensitivity during interviews and interpretation. Consistent with qualitative trustworthiness criteria, the study strengthened rigour through (a) detailed documentation of analytic decisions (dependability), (b) reflexive notes on assumptions and interpretive choices (confirmability), and (c) a thick description of participant context to support readers' judgment of transferability (Connelly, 2016; Li, 2025). Interview rapport was supported through an empathetic, nonjudgmental stance (Patton, 2002).

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Name (Gender)	Generation	Place of Birth	Age	Education	Years in Australia
Tom (male)	1.5	Fujian, China	29	PhD	21
Anny (female)	1.5	Nanjing, China	24	Undergraduate	15
Caroline (female)	2nd	Melbourne, Australia	21	Undergraduate	21

Note. All names are pseudonyms.

RESULTS

Our thematic analysis revealed three interrelated themes in how participants negotiated their ethnic identities: (1) linguistic positioning, (2) peer and community belonging, and (3) intergenerational expectations and tensions. All three participants adopted hybrid self-identifications, describing themselves with dual labels that blend Chinese heritage and Australian belonging. For example, Tom identified as "Chinese Australian," Caroline as "Australian Chinese" (often termed Australian-born Chinese), and Anny as "Fujian-Australian," invoking her Chinese province of birth. These labels set the stage for how each young person positioned their identity in different contexts. Tom, who migrated at age 8, noted that his bicultural background could be an asset.

> "I prefer to showcase my Chinese side [when job-hunting] … my bicultural identity is an advantage. This gave me more options… which is why I found a position in Beijing," he explained.

Tom thus positions himself as more Chinese or more Australian depending on context, leveraging his dual background when beneficial. Caroline, born in Australia to Chinese parents, described herself as "half and half."

> She said, "My mom always reminds me, 'You're Chinese,' but I was born and raised here, so that's why I'm Australian."

This highlights Caroline's tug-of-war between her mother's assertion of a Chinese identity and her own sense of being Australian. In contrast, Anny's self-description linked strongly to place: calling herself Fujian-Australian underscored a pride in her Chinese origins alongside her life in Australia. Below, we elaborate each theme with participants' voices and interpretations.

Linguistic Positioning

Language emerged as a key medium for identity expression and a source of contrast in participants' experiences. Mastery of Chinese languages (Mandarin or dialects) often bolstered a sense of cultural identity, while external reactions to English proficiency sometimes marked them as "other." Tom's narrative exemplifies how linguistic abilities can shape one's identity position. Having spent his early childhood in China, he is fluent in Mandarin and even a regional dialect.

> He remarked, "The Australian-born Chinese are less Chinese than I am… I can not only speak Mandarin but also my local dialect. Perhaps this is because I lived with my grandparents until I was 8."

Here, Tom claims an insider position in Chinese culture through language. His ability to speak the Fujian dialect – a skill imparted by his family upbringing – makes him feel "more Chinese" than peers who were born in Australia. This linguistic confidence also influences how he presents himself: in Australia, he can "feel at home" culturally, yet his bilingual prowess allows him to switch cultural frames when needed.

In contrast, participants also experienced language as a marker of difference in mainstream settings. Anny noted that despite speaking fluent English, her appearance triggers surprise about her language skills.

> "When I travel in Australia, people ask where I come from and even compliment my English," she said.

Such comments, although perhaps well-intentioned, positioned Anny as a perpetual outsider in her country of residence – as if being of Chinese background is assumed incompatible with native-level English. This raciolinguistic positioning reminded Anny that others see her as not fully Australian. Nevertheless, she actively embraces her bilingualism and Chinese language use as a positive identity choice. During her interview, Anny comfortably code-switched between Mandarin and English. She also described preferring Chinese-language media in daily life,

> "I use WeChat and other popular Chinese apps… I hardly use Facebook Messenger anymore; very few of my friends use Facebook."

By gravitating toward Mandarin-language social platforms and content, Anny reinforces her connection to Chinese culture. This voluntary engagement with Chinese media and bilingual communication is a way of claiming her ethnic identity in an Australian context. In sum, language use was a crucial arena in which participants both expressed their heritage and were assigned identity positions by others.

Peer and Community Belonging

All three young people consistently found comfort and solidarity among friends with similar migrant backgrounds while feeling out of place in settings where they were seen as "different." Anny, who moved to Australia at age 9, spoke vividly about bonding with other Asian Australian students.

> "I have many Asian migrant friends, and we often joke about each other's country's food… Perhaps it's because we are all Asian and understand each other," she said. "When we have differences, we mostly identify ourselves as Chinese or Vietnamese, even though we are Australian citizens."

These playful exchanges about Chinese, Vietnamese, and other cuisines created a sense of camaraderie. By affectionately joking and openly calling themselves Chinese, Vietnamese, etc., Anny and her friends affirmed each other's identities. This suggests that among peers of similar heritage, ethnic labels can be worn proudly and serve as a bond. Despite holding Australian citizenship, they felt psychologically "at home", referring to their ancestral cultures. As Anny's experience illustrates, being part of an immigrant community allowed these youths to freely celebrate their ethnic background without fear of exclusion, a form of collective empowerment in a multicultural society.

At the same time, participants recounted feeling "in-between" or marginal in other community contexts. For instance, when Anny steps outside her circle, she never feels completely accepted as Australian. People's curiosity about her origins and the frequent "Your English is so good!" compliments underscore that she is seen as a foreigner by some Australians. Conversely, visits to China can also spotlight her otherness.

> "When I go back to China to visit my relatives, I'm a complete alien as well, even though I speak the language," Anny explained, describing herself as "some combination of a tourist and a Chinese expatriate."

She and Tom both experienced this duality of belonging. Tom felt caught between communities during a trip to his hometown in Fujian: despite his local language ability and Chinese upbringing, he sensed he was "too Australian" to fully fit in with peers there. He did not establish friendships outside his family on those visits, feeling more like a visitor than a local visitor. Caroline also encountered a gap when attempting to connect with her heritage community. She eagerly anticipated her first-ever trip to China to meet extended family, only to find the experience isolating.

> "I was excited… but it didn't feel like a vacation… I felt like there was a lack of connection with family," she recalled.

Circumstances (such as her grandfather's hospitalization during the visit) meant that the homecoming she imagined of immersing herself in Chinese family life, never materialized. These accounts highlight a poignant reality: within both Australian society and their ancestral homeland, the participants often occupy a

liminal space. They are neither fully insider nor outsider. Their sense of belonging is highly context dependent. Among fellow diaspora youth, they feel a mutual understanding and belongingness, whereas in predominantly white Australian settings or in China, they report feeling like they "don't completely belong." This fluid, situational belonging speaks to the complexity of growing up between cultures.

Intergenerational Expectations and Tensions

Family interactions played a crucial role in how these young people negotiated their ethnic identities, especially expectations from parents and elders. Participants described both pressures to uphold Chinese traditions and their own ambivalence or selective engagement with those traditions. Caroline's experience as a second-generation Chinese Australian encapsulates this dynamic. She recounted that her mother is adamant about instilling Chinese identity and customs in her. "My mom always reminds me, 'You're Chinese,'" Caroline said, reflecting on how she is continually urged to remember her roots. This refrain from sometimes clashing with Caroline's personal sense of self, since she has only ever known life in Australia. The result is a subtle strain: Caroline respects her heritage but resists the implication that she must identify only as Chinese. "I was born and raised here… that's why I'm Australian," she reminds her mother, asserting her local identity alongside her Chinese heritage. This ongoing negotiation of "Chineseness" at home illustrates a common intergenerational friction.

Specific cultural practices further reveal this intergenerational gap. Caroline gave an example of feeling uneasy with a Chinese ritual that her mother performed in Australia.

> "I'm unfamiliar with traditional Chinese culture, like… joss paper. I don't fully understand the ritual and mostly view it as a curiosity. So when my mum did this in Melbourne, I felt uncomfortable," she admitted.

Burning joss paper (symbolic money for ancestors) was normal for her mother, but for Caroline, it was strange and even unsettling. This incident made Caroline acutely aware of the distance between her and her mother's cultural worldviews. While she does not reject her Chinese heritage, she cannot relate to certain traditional beliefs, which creates a feeling of disconnection. Caroline's reaction "I felt uncomfortable" hints at a gentle form of resistance to blindly following tradition. She navigates these expectations carefully, neither openly rebelling nor fully embracing all of them.

Tom's family experience highlights a different facet of intergenerational influence. In his case, family support helped transmit cultural identity in positive ways. Tom lived with his grandparents in China during early childhood, which gave him a strong foundation in Chinese language and customs. He continued to practice aspects of Chinese culture in Australia, especially through daily habits such as food. This enduring preference, "rooted in his upbringing," shows how

parental or grandparental influence can foster lasting cultural affinity. Tom's adherence to eating rice, a simple tradition, provides him with comfort and a sense of continuity with his heritage. Not all peers share such tastes, implying that some of his contemporaries have diverged from their parents' culture more than he has. Such variations sometimes led Tom to feel a bit out of sync with both generations: more traditional than some Aussie-born Chinese friends but also modern in ways that older relatives might not fully understand. Anny did not describe specific conflicts with her parents, but her narrative suggests an ongoing balancing act. She actively consumes Chinese media and maintains her Mandarin, which likely aligns with her family's cultural hopes. At the same time, she is growing up in a different society than her parents did, which can create unspoken tensions around values, lifestyle, and identity.

In summary, family heritage and expectations exert a powerful influence on these youth, positioning them in particular ways. Caroline feels "burdened" at times by her mother's insistence on Chineseness, yet she also internalizes aspects of that identity (proudly acknowledging her roots when asked by others). Tom was positioned by his elders as the carrier of Fujian family culture a role he largely embraces, but he also pursues his own bicultural path. These intergenerational dynamics required participants to negotiate their position: they honor their families' culture to varying degrees while also asserting an independent identity that fits their lived reality in Australia.

Positioning theory as an analytic lens

Applying Positioning Theory helped illuminate how these participants claim, negotiate, and resist identity positions across family, peer, and institutional contexts. According to this theory, identity is not a fixed trait but is constantly shaped through positions we take up in relation to others' expectations and social narratives. The youths in our study were frequently positioned by others – for example, strangers in Australia positioning Anny as foreigners with comments about her English or Caroline's mother positioning her as "Chinese" to uphold family tradition. At the same time, the participants actively positioned themselves in response. In peer settings, they often claimed an insider position within multicultural friendship groups by highlighting shared ethnicity or bilingual skills. In family settings, they sometimes challenged positions assigned by parents, gently resisting when elders tried to define their identity too narrowly. These interactions illustrate how identity positions can be "accepted, challenged, or assigned" in different moments. Positioning theory provided a valuable framework for interpreting these dynamics: it directed attention to the context-dependent roles the participants occupied (student, job seeker, daughter/son, friend) and the surrounding storylines (e.g., "being a dutiful Chinese child" or "fitting in as an Aussie"). Through this lens, we see that each participant's ethnic identity negotiation was essentially a process of storytelling and stance-taking. They continuously balanced the personal positions they preferred (such as embracing a hybrid Chinese Australian identity) with the interactive positions imposed by family, peers, or society. In institutional contexts such as school and

work, this meant at times accentuating one identity facet over another, as when Tom showcased his Chinese background to potential employers or when Anny felt pressure to prove she belonged in English-speaking academia. In sum, Positioning Theory underscores that these young immigrants' identities were forged in interaction: they became who they are by navigating the rights and duties of multiple worlds, deftly positioning themselves where they felt belonging and repositioning themselves when they faced exclusion. This analytic lens thus deepened our understanding of the complex, fluid negotiation of ethnic identity in their lives.

DISCUSSION

This pilot study explored how young Chinese immigrants in Melbourne negotiate ethnic identity through language, peer relations, and intergenerational dynamics. Drawing on three in-depth cases, the findings show that identity negotiation is context dependent, relational, and strategically enacted rather than fixed or uniform. Across all cases, participants demonstrated a bicultural orientation, valuing both Chinese heritage and Australian life (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013; Benyamin, 2018), yet they encountered specific challenges related to linguistic positioning, social belonging, and family expectations. These findings extend prior work on hybrid identity by illustrating how such identities are actively positioned and repositioned in everyday interactions.

Language emerged as a central resource through which participants positioned themselves and were positioned by others. Tom's ability to speak Mandarin and a regional dialect enabled him to claim insider status within Chinese cultural contexts and leverage bilingualism as cultural capital in professional settings. His case supports research showing that heritage language competence can enhance agency and mobility for immigrant youth (Pan, 2018; Park, 2021). However, Tom's sense of belonging remained fragile: despite linguistic proficiency, he felt like a visitor in China, illustrating the limits of language as a sole marker of cultural membership.

Anny's experiences further highlight the ambivalence of linguistic positioning. While she actively sustained Chinese identity through Mandarin use, Chinese-language media, and ethnic social networks, she was frequently positioned as an outsider in Australia through comments about her English proficiency. Caroline's experience contrasts with both: as a second-generation participant, her limited engagement with traditional language and rituals created distance from her mother's cultural world, reinforcing intergenerational gaps rather than external exclusion.

Peer relationships played a critical role in shaping participants' sense of belonging. All three participants reported greater comfort and validation when socializing with peers of similar migrant backgrounds. For Anny, joking with Asian Australian friends about food and cultural habits fostered solidarity and affirmed ethnic identity. Such everyday interactions align with research showing that coethnic peer networks buffer against marginalization and support identity affirmation (Graham & Echols, 2018; Sonn et al., 2022).

At the same time, broader community interactions often reminded participants of their outsider status. Caroline's repeated encounters with the question "Where are you from?" illustrate how second-generation migrants continue to be perceived as foreign despite being Australian born. This mirrors findings that visible minorities often experience conditional belonging in multicultural societies (Ang, 2014; White, 2016). Rather than rejecting either identity, participants responded by adopting inclusive, hyphenated labels (e.g., Chinese Australian), reflecting a pragmatic integration strategy consistent with Berry's acculturation framework (Berry et al., 2016). These findings underscore that belonging is not singular but layered, negotiated differently across peer, institutional, and public contexts.

Intergenerational dynamics emerged as another key site of identity negotiation. Caroline's ambivalence toward traditional practices such as ancestor rituals highlights tensions between parental expectations and Australian socialization. While she respected her heritage, unfamiliarity with cultural meanings generated discomfort, echoing research on acculturation gaps in immigrant families (Renzaho et al., 2017). Tom and Anny, as 1.5-generation migrants, retained stronger cultural ties through early family socialization, yet even they experienced moments of disconnection as family relationships evolved or weakened over time.

These findings align with studies showing that family remains a primary anchor of ethnic identity, even when tensions arise (Juang & Syed, 2010). Importantly, participants did not frame these tensions as outright conflict but as ongoing negotiation. They selectively engaged with cultural practices that provided comfort and meaning rather than adhering to tradition for its own sake. This supports prior work suggesting that bicultural identity development often involves adaptation rather than preservation or rejection (Umaña-Taylor & Schwartz, 2013).

Positioning theory offers a useful lens for understanding these dynamics by foregrounding identity as interactional and situational (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Across contexts, participants were positioned by others and responded by accepting, resisting, or reframing these positions. Anny resisted outsider positioning by reaffirming her right to belong in Australia; Tom transformed ethnic positioning into professional advantage; Caroline negotiated familial positioning by redefining what being Chinese meant to her. These acts of repositioning demonstrate identity agency, highlighting how young immigrants actively manage competing narratives rather than passively absorbing them (Reyes, 2017; Killen et al., 2013). The findings thus extend positioning theory by showing how young migrants navigate simultaneous and sometimes contradictory positions across social domains.

Although based on a small sample, this study was intentionally designed as an exploratory pilot to generate in-depth insights rather than generalisable claims (Yin, 2017). In qualitative research, analytic depth and contextual richness are central criteria of quality (Patton, 2015). The three cases offered variation in generational status and migration trajectories, allowing for meaningful comparison and theoretical insight. Similar small-sample qualitative studies have

demonstrated that focused, narrative-rich designs can yield a valuable understanding of identity and belonging (Cena et al., 2021). While the findings cannot represent all Chinese immigrant youth, they illuminate key mechanisms, linguistic positioning, peer affiliation, and intergenerational negotiation, which warrant further investigation. Future research with larger and more diverse samples could test the transferability of these patterns and examine how identity positioning evolves over time.

Conclusion

The study's findings indicate that young Chinese Australians actively negotiate their ethnic identities through contextual and relational processes. Participants adopted hybrid, hyphenated identity labels and drew on language, peer networks, and family norms to position themselves between Chinese heritage and Australian culture. Through a positioning-theory lens, identity emerges as continually reconstructed in everyday interactions. These insights enrich the understanding of migrant youth identity by highlighting its fluid, agentive nature and the role of both heritage and host influences. Although based on a small pilot sample, the qualitative approach yielded rich, nuanced data. Future research with larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs could test the transferability of these patterns and explore how identity positioning evolves over time. Overall, the study underscores the complex dynamics of bicultural identity formation in multicultural societies.

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- ☐ *None*
- x☐ *Some sections, with minimal or no editing*
- ☐ *Some sections, with extensive editing*
- ☐ *Entire work, with minimal or no editing*
- ☐ *Entire work, with extensive editing*

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