Chapter 5

Identity Shifts as a Consequence of Crossing Cultures:
Hong Kong Chinese Migrants Return Home*

Nan M. Sussman

In this chapter, I explore a psychological conceptualization of the dynamic nature of cultural identity and the behavioral consequences of East-West transitions. Amidst the existing complexity and emergence of a Hong Kong identity is added the newest geographic movement from Hong Kong to North America, Australia and England in the 1980s and early 1990s, and the remigration to Hong Kong in the first decade of the 21st century. The case of Hong Kongers’ changing cultural identities and the behavioral manifestation of those identities is viewed through the lens of a model of cultural transitions and identity response profiles proposed by Sussman (2000), and will be contrasted to both US/European and Japanese repatriation experiences.

Three central premises of this chapter upon which theoretical and empirical data are presented are the flexible and dynamic nature of cultural identities which enables transformation and hybridization, the evaluative variability of affective, cognitive and behavioral outcomes, and the ability of individuals to maintain and negotiate multiple cultural frames activated by situational cues. In turn, these cues access differential sets of behavior and cognition that reflect the cultural frame.

Definitions of terms will clarify this discussion. In the cultural transition literature, distinctions are frequently made between sojourners and migrants, the former being expatriated citizens of one country

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temporarily taking residence in another for a specific task or assignment (education, business, diplomacy or conversion) with the intention of returning home. Immigrants have been described as taking permanent residence in a new country with amorphous political, economic and social motivations and goals. Hong Kong cultural transitors blur these distinctions, as we will see later in this chapter. Those intending to return do not, those choosing permanent change return, and the intentions of many are unclear to themselves and others.

Through the discussion of linked themes, I propose to explore the identity change process that Hong Kong Chinese are undergoing and the consequential negotiation of multiple identities. First, a discussion of the place of identity research within the psychological perspective will be summarized. While it is not within the scope of this chapter to present an exhaustive review of the literature, I will present several critical elements of identity conceptualizations. The case will then be made that collective identity and more particularly, cultural identity, are subsets of the multiplicity of possible identities. Second, I provide an abbreviated review of research documenting the identity of the Chinese population of Hong Kong and the emergence of the ‘Hong Konger’ identity. Third, I use the cultural identity model of cultural transitions (Sussman, 2000) to describe the cultural transitions of outgoing Hong Kong migration and re-migration during the last two decades. Fourth, I review empirical findings that examine the cultural identity profiles and outcomes of US and Japanese repatriates. Finally, drawing on the results of a recent study, I discuss variations in the Hong Konger cultural identity response to remigration.

**Psychological Perspective on Identity**

At its core, psychology has always explored issues of the self and identity. While other social sciences have shared this interest, resulting in conceptualizations of political, linguistic, class and geographic identity theories, the essential element of psychological thought has been the individual, and so it is with identity. Personal identity, or those characteristics which are unique to an individual and set them apart from others, and relational identity, or those features in which the self and familiar others interact, were the major focus of attention. Social psychological writings, however, broadened the concept by examining group membership in which members do not necessarily interact or