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# What does it mean to be “Chinese” outside of China today? Initial Remarks.

Gregory B. Lee

► **To cite this version:**

Gregory B. Lee. What does it mean to be “Chinese” outside of China today? Initial Remarks.. The Oxford China Conversations IV: ‘What does it mean to be “Chinese” outside of China today?’, Oxford China Centre, May 2021, Oxford, United Kingdom. ⟨halshs-05271256⟩

**HAL Id: halshs-05271256**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-05271256v1>**

Submitted on 21 Sep 2025

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Gregory B. Lee  
Founding Professor of Chinese Studies,  
University of St Andrews

Oxford China Centre, China Centre Seminar Series: Conversations. The Oxford China Conversations IV. 'What does it mean to be "Chinese" outside of China today?' 20 May 2021. Initial Remarks.

Our topic, 'What does it mean to be "Chinese" outside of China today?', pushes us to address what we mean by "Chinese", what we mean by "China", and what Chineseness signifies. This is also a question of representation. How China and Chinese(ness) have been represented both in China and outside of China, both in the popular imaginary and in academic discourse. For now, let us simply recall that the proper noun "China" is a 16thC European invention, and that its Chinese-language equivalent, *Zhongguo* 中國, did not become current until the second half of the 19thC; I discuss all this at length in my recent book and I shan't dwell on it here.

Our question also implies a discussion of the Chinese diaspora, and thus of the nature of diaspora. I think we might address this in depth during the discussion. I'll just say for now, I see the Chinese diaspora as signifying above all, a reality of lived experience of ordinary people, of women and of men, who have settled around the world who have lived through the real problems of immigration, racism, and economic hardship, and whose history has, *until recently*, gone largely untold.

But let me first make a few brief remarks about the sense, the meaning of "Chineseness" in modern times.

For China's authorities, Chineseness may arise from

- 1) living within the confines of the borders of China from Tibet to Hong Kong regardless of ethnic origins, or at least this was the case until the advent of Xi Jinping's presidency and a policy that looks more and more like national homogenization, if not something akin to ethnic cleansing;

2) Or, and this is seemingly contradictory, having Chinese "blood" – in other words, being of Han Chinese ancestry wherever you live in the world (which obviously begs the question of the definition of Han 漢); it also leaves aside the question of other China-defined ethnicities in the diaspora such as the Hakka 客家.

3) And then there is being Chinese simply because the Chinese authorities say you are, as in when they refuse to respect naturalisation to other nationalities, and subject you to Chinese law, as we saw first in 2015 with the Hong Kong Causeway Bay booksellers' abduction to mainland China despite their Swedish and UK nationalities.

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Now, let me address our question again. 'What does it mean to be "Chinese" outside of China today?'

The question is not new, but the answers periodically and necessarily need to be modified. Let us come straight to today's Britain, since that is where we are. Tens of thousands, more likely hundreds of thousands of people will be taking advantage of the UK government's BNO (British National Overseas) passport-holder visa scheme. And they will move to the UK. Their attachment to a form of Chinese culture is obvious. But they are also Hongkongers, just as the hundreds of thousands who have emigrated to Canada over the 40 years since Mrs Thatcher signed away Hong Kong to PRC sovereignty.

There is also a difference between current immigration from Hong Kong and that which took place in the 1960s and 1970s; many of those immigrants had direct connections to mainland China. For them, Hong Kong had been but a halfway house preferably to the USA, by default to the UK. Not so the current migrants for whom Hong Kong is/was home. So, I think that today we can talk legitimately of a Hong Kong diaspora as distinct from a "Chinese" diaspora.

The make-up of the UK population that claims Chinese heritage has always varied. The provincial origins of the various communities have changed from decade to decade. But the preponderant mainland Chinese migration that we've seen since the 1990s, mainly student-led, will now be supplemented by a significant new migration from Hong Kong. In a sense then, that will re-connect communities with their formerly dominant Cantonese-speaking origins. However, the social base of those now emigrating and their sense of belonging will probably be quite distinct.

For now, we are stuck with the proper noun "China", and the adjective "Chinese" to identify people, country, ethnicity and language. These terms are woefully inadequate to describe the complexity behind them, but extremely useful to those who would mask reality.

As to the question of identity. In the USA what we now call Chinese Americans fought long and hard to shake off terms like ABC (American-born Chinese), to arrive at Chinese American without the hyphen, to be first and foremost American, the noun, the person, the citizen, where Chinese simply denotes an origin. Like Polish American, Italian American.

In the UK we settled for British Chinese, where origin and appearance predominate. Recently in an attempt to be inclusive and to embrace those *who look Chinese* to white eyes, but are not, and also so as to foster a greater inclusiveness, younger generations have preferred the term British East Asian – but the problem remains the same, and they are stuck with categories not of their own making. Of course, to some of us, for historical and political reasons, the category East Asian is also somewhat inappropriate.

None of these categories are leak-proof. I mentioned just now Chinese American, but it can also seem homogenizing to some. Many of those with Taiwan origins prefer to be known as Taiwanese American.

Sadly, whether you identify as Chinese American or Taiwanese American, or even Korean American, most white Americans will see you as simply "Chinese" –and if they subscribe to Trumps #chinesevirus conspiracy theory – will see you as a legitimate target for anti-Chinese aggression. (See my article "#chinesevirus: The Long Racism

that Lurks Behind COVID-19" <https://postcolonialpolitics.org/chinesevirus-racism-behind-covid-19/>)

Thus, one's apparent "Chineseness" can be a question of plain survival. For first, second, third generation "Chinese" in Europe and elsewhere the crucial issue today is, once again, one of racism.

So could we try to re-think, to re-imagine Chineseness for those "outside China"?

In spatial and societal terms we could start by recognizing the multiplicity and plurality of Chinese identities. Most importantly, the reality of lived, experienced societal and cultural mixity should be admitted and respected, as should the right of the individual to identify themselves as they wish, and not as the beholder imposes.

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Gregory B. Lee