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## Feeling Homesick at Home: A Dialogue

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**Abstract:** As we suggested in 2005, “centrisms” exist in historical space, rhetorical space, physical space, national space, postcolonial space, and in mental space. They are inscribed authentically, by those groups who have lived a cultural experience, or inauthentically, by those outside of the community. They reflect a more or less actual history, or they may represent idealized conceptions of how a community should or might be. Centrisms are always at some site of contestation. The avowal of an identity is met with charges of essentialism, and is regarded by some as a binary oversimplification. When viewed as a willing reinscription of identity that replaces what colonial and slave history may have undercut, though, Cote D’Ivoire President Félix Houphouët-Boigny’s words seem apt: “Better to be dominated by a friend than by an enemy.” Our present dialogue questions the utility of centrisms in “a globalizing world.” [China Media Research. 2009; 5(1): 87-94]

**Keywords:** authenticity, centrism, creolization, diaspora, essentialism, globalization, identity,

**Starosta:** We have talked much about culture over these many years. We have equated it with nation-state at some points, and have considered culture as a pool of shared meanings. In each of these instances, culture supposed a natural and willing ownership of ideas, beliefs, and meanings. We assumed it ordinary that someone would willingly participate in a cultural heritage and conditioning.

But now we add history. If we consider conditions where a colonial power or a foreign entity imposed a cultural system onto an unwilling community, our earlier assumptions might be falsified. Must the colonized, the conquered, or the enslaved, willingly own another’s imposed meanings and beliefs? Could the community be better served by restoring meanings and beliefs of a people remote in place and time?

**Chen:** Hmm... you get to the point of the dialogue so directly. I thought we should first have a like eh or um ice breaking greeting before get into the point to make the discussion more playful. After all, life is a stage, isn’t it? ☺

With the thousand faces of culture, I don’t think there is any problem to accept the conceptualization of culture as a pool of shared meanings. The question is why history has to play such an important role in culturing. Just look at what happens now in the contemporary human societies, the old culture has gone, but the new culture doesn’t come into existence yet. In this “culturally anarchic” situation, due to the constant impact of new technology development, culture as a shared meaning seems to become a transient phenomenon. It is perceivable that a group won’t be a group without its own history, and it is unthinkable for the group members to lose the historical memory. However, the birth of most new cultures in human history seldom relies on the history or the nostalgia of history. In other words, history is often a hindrance to the creation of a new culture (Shanghai Forecast Center,

2005). The old meanings may be refreshed, but an old culture can never be resurrected. If so, why do we need to tie culture and history together so tightly? Why don’t we look ahead more and look back less?

**Starosta:** Um, of course, professor. I should practice Asian indirectness, *enryo-sasshi*. Perhaps a Japanese apology would help, since I do not know how to bake you a mooncake? ☺

The old is gone, the new has not yet happened. This approximates Émile Durkheim’s definition of anomie, rootlessness, a restlessness that ensues when things change rapidly. It is a time of suicides, a time of disengagement. Cultural anarchy? Perhaps. An absence of shared meaning? Might we say “shared meaninglessness,” if we are going to be existential?

A search for old roots as “nostalgia of history”? That is an interesting perspective. But it may not do justice to the search for a renewed sense of history. I think the quest is to discover a way to identify one’s place in history, and to locate ways that history can continue to inform the present, as a source of root meaning:

The researchers may not really want to atavistically return to some previous year or cultural condition; their motivation is something more than cultural nostalgia. Perhaps they style themselves as keepers and preservers of authentic cultural knowledge; more likely, they hope to reconstruct a coherent statement of what was, so that it can be braided with what has become. They search for a cultural center that holds ..., a “centrism” .... (Starosta, 2006, p. 66)

Root meaning, or “centrism.” Centrism offers the chance to define the self, and to resist the definition of others.

**Chen:** Those culturally bound vocabularies, such as apology, *dao chien*, regret, sorry, and *yi han*, have been causing too many ripples in the East-West

communication since the standoff between the United States and the People's Republic of China on the spy plane incident in 2001 (Chen, 2001; Sun & Starosta, 2002), I guess we don't need an apology for a mooncake here, lest the essence of the dialogue should be drowned in the cultural ripple. ☺ In addition, the mooncake is not necessary to belong to any specific culture. I remember once I went to an Italian restaurant and liked the garlic spaghetti so much, when I went home I tried to copy the dish based on the ingredients I saw in the plate. It turned out to be a different kind of garlic spaghetti, and kids loved it and named it "Dr. Noodle." Since then, this "spaghetti" or "noodle," both Italian and Chinese, but neither Italian nor Chinese, has become a regular dish in our gathering with friends of different cultural backgrounds.

This personal culinary experience seems to reflect the characteristics of transience, novelty, and diversity of contemporary human society (Toffler, 1984), in which the cultural interaction becomes much more dynamic, interpenetrative, interconnected, and hybridized. The shared meaning of a group may be transculturated (or like how the garlic spaghetti was transfigured into Dr. Noodle) overnight into a totally new meaning by members of another group (Mundorf & Chen, 2006), and the new meaning may also be accepted by the original group, or even replaces the original meaning (Chan, 2001).

From the perspective of history or cultural tradition, the features of this information/knowledge/digitalization-based contemporary age are quite disturbing. The problem is that while history and cultural tradition are closely related and co-created, it is quite contrary for the relationship between history and cultural competitiveness. What I try to say is that the new way of life in the contemporary information society is completely different from the previous agricultural and industrial societies. Thus, the history and cultural tradition simply are unable to serve as a useful mirror again, reflecting the future direction human beings can follow. The only working mirror is what and where we are here and now, only through the understanding of the present situation can a better future be projected. In other words, to live here and now is the best way to identify one's place in writing the history.

I don't oppose your view that history can continue to inform the present. What I worry is when a group is going back to its history or cultural tradition for the solutions of present problems or for a future direction, it may get stuck inside the black hole woven by the history or tradition. All ancient civilizations have been gone, except China. If history and cultural tradition can give us the root meaning, the on-going existing space, why did they disappear? Now look at China, could it survive by looking back to its history and cultural tradition as a savior? When Chinese intellectuals were

searching for solutions for their own social problems in the last two centuries from their own tradition, they fell into the trap of either cultural narcissism or cultural inferiority. The former assumed that what China had can continue to make what China is and will be; the latter sheerly abandoned what China had, and instead embraced totally what the West has. As the less popular eclectic thought, neither of these ways worked before or is working now.

I know a possible extension from this argument is that only history and cultural tradition can foster the sense of identity, such as the Chinese or Japanese cultural identity or the idea of centrism like the labels of Afrocentric, Asiatic, and Eurocentric. I am just not sure whether one's cultural identity based on the history and tradition can do any good in this swift-changing age. I am wondering why cultural identity cannot be cultivated like a modern building, that's accomplished based on the contemporary needs and design. Furthermore, I am not sure why cultural identity is so critical in reaching the goal of intercultural communication? I am wondering that if we can go beyond the haunting of cultural identity, we might be able to conduct a more authentic intercultural communication. To have or not to have a strong cultural identity is really a great puzzle to me.

I am sure that you are able to help me clarify, in a more specific way and possibly with successful examples in human societies, your views on the history and cultural tradition by connecting to the root meaning, identity, or centrism.

**Starosta:** "Life is a stage," on which we cook (Chinese) (Garlic) Dr. Noodles. And so we ponder what happens when actors on the stage write their own lines (culture) (Pirandello, 1998). Once I used a cooking metaphor to talk of how persons come to understand the culture (cooking) of another (acculturation), but I never thought to tell persons how to give up or to abandon their existing cultural recipes (assimilation) (Starosta, 1999). Ahh, could it be better to open one's own (authentic) pho (noodle) shop than to serve syncretized fast food ("Dr. Noodles")? Cellophane noodles, lasagna noodles, rice noodles, aushak noodles, stroganoff noodles. If we decide to abandon the noodles we know, have we any need for the notion of "noodles" (culture) at all? ☺

History and cultural tradition versus history and cultural competitiveness? It may be but a word game to ask how cultures can "compete," in the absence of at least two identifiable cultures. That modern culture could be "completely different" from some previous culture also does not speak to my own researcher worldview. The modern interacts with the past, the past with the modern. The French say *plus ce change, plus c'est l'meme chose*, the more things change, the more they stay the same. I think this view speaks to the idea

of “authenticity” that you introduce. “Authentic intercultural communication” must refer back to “the root nature” of the cultures involved; how could it do otherwise?

**Chen:** I think that the “authentic” *pho* or noodle is just a self-claimed product or an idealistic view of culture. Everything must subject to change. The authentic noodle now tends to be different from the authentic noodle 10 or 20 years ago (don’t even mention 50 or 100 years), either the elements of the noodle change or even the structure changes too to fit the taste of people in different time and space. It is more so in the intercultural context. For instance, I was told that for having the authentic Chinese foods in this country, I had to go to Chinatown, because those Chinese restaurants outside the Chinatown have been Americanized. The problem is when I went to Chinatown, I didn’t see that the “authentic” Chinese foods in Chinatown were the same as those in Shanghai or Taipei. Hence, we don’t need to intentionally abandon the noodle, the substance of the noodle will be naturally and gradually disappearing or renewed in the process of change intraculturally and intercultural. And interestingly, no matter how they change, they are still called Chinese foods or noodle. Or someone may call it Americanized Chinese noodle, but it won’t affect the fact that it is still a kind of Chinese noodle, though this noodle is not that noodle anymore. I am not sure whether the example relates to the French saying you quoted, i.e., “the more things change, the more they stay the same,” but the saying sounds too philosophical for me to grasp, because it seems aims to discourage change.

So what’s the “root nature” of a culture that can be relied on for being called an authentic intercultural communication? I am afraid that the “root” of a culture won’t be able to stick on the ground so firmly and twistingly like before. This may be an age of shaking or uprooting the culture tree in order to survive in the competition among different cultures. In my opinion, trying to, say, hold the legs of Confucianism and wish to use it to solve the problems Chinese face now simply won’t lead China to anywhere. My point is that this seems a time when the root nature of culture is under a great challenge for survival. The much faster pace of change nowadays may demand us a new way of writing the history, which is not only different from what the history was written, but also doesn’t need to rely much on the previous history as a reference for the writing.

I may sound cynical toward the relationship between history and culture, but when I observe how the modern technology changes and molds the way we think and behave, especially the new generations, I begin to ponder if a new view or theory on history and culture needs to be fostered. Or probably I am overly concerned. May be everything will be just fine

by following the footstep of history and traditional culture.

**Starosta:** The world’s peoples know their “roots.” They remember tribe (Hutus and Tutsis) and they remember access to historical levers of power (Nigerian Igbos). They remember language (Sri Lanka Tamils and Singhalese, Indian Sikhs, Quebecois). They remember historical wrongs and religion (the protestant and catholic Irish). They remember disputed land (India and Pakistan). They remember skin tone (apartheid). They measure differences in demographics according to their ability to elevate one population over another (Sudan, Bosnia). People remember, selectively, all too often, differences of religion, historical domination and hegemony, slavery, colonialism, linguistic divides. Such remembrances, though they carry the potential to elevate cultural dialogue, commonly lead instead to mutually destructive interaction. Acultural scholars pass so quickly over what the many peoples of the world do not forget.

I do not see that basing ones work in a search for commonality and pop culture similarities can deny the existence of historical and cultural predilections. Nor do I ask the Hinduism of pre-vedic civilization, nor the Inca civilizations of early Mesoamerica, to edify me today to help me choose an Internet service.

An acultural point of view suggests that the modern, the attributed universal, is the only measure of culture, thereby excusing modernists from learning about cultural variability, or non-western languages, just as it authorizes the study of Chinese discourse using western models:

...applying ...a culturally exclusive theory to other cultural contexts is like using the European concept of opera to analyze a Peking opera. It may perhaps reveal some interesting features, but it will fail to see many other important properties at the same time, and will very likely arrive at a negative evaluation. (Shi-xu, p. 387)

Five Indian cooks drawn from across the Indian subcontinent look past the fish or bitter gourd, the rice or bread, the whole or ground spices, and still perceive “Indian” food. Thus, McDonald’s in Delhi serves vegetarian food, in Paris wine, in Munich beer. Changes in surface structure do not negate the root culture: not in fact, not in memory. Next year, one of the Indian cooks may use tofu in her preparations. The result remains recognizably “Indian” in its cultural orientation.

**Chen:** Yes, people always know and remember what happened before. The remembrance of one’s cultural tradition and history is human nature. As I previously indicated, the pitfall of remembering or celebrating the past exists in the possibility of being intoxicated in that process. Cultural tradition or history is a gigantic magnet or a pool of fine wine, when people

access it, they may unconsciously get stuck or get drunk in it. I am not against cultural tradition or history, instead, I advocate that we must know and remember our past. But, remembrance is not enough. We must be able to “walk through” the past to face the present. This process of transforming then into now requires a creative mindset, which demands us to avoid indulging in the past tradition. For instance, Chinese people should feel proud when they see that Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz borrowed the idea of 0 (- -) and 1 (-) binary number system from the concept of *yin* and *yang* in *I Ching* or the *Book of Changes* and invented the calculating machine, the forerunner of modern computer, because it is their cultural tradition that led to the improvement of the modern human society. Nevertheless, Chinese people must understand that the calculating machine or computer is not their invention, even if the binary number system was their past achievement. The same to the gun powder invented in Song dynasty, the Chinese must know that the gun powder didn't explode to the invention of a modern rocket in China. This transformation of history or cultural tradition into the present is where I try to focus.

I am disturbed by the rejection of using western models to study, for example, the Chinese. The issue should never be an “either-or” dichotomized solution. Why can we only use Chinese models to study Chinese problems, or use Western models to study Western problems? The lack of openness is the biggest enemy for self improvement. “*Dang ju zhe mi*” (Those closely involve cannot see as clearly as those outside), the blind spot caused by one's own culture sometimes needs to rely on the beholder's eyes to correct it. An outsider may not see what an insider can see, but an outsider may see what an insider cannot see. For a cultural system to survive, it must be open to the inputs from outside. As the Chinese *Books of Odes* said, “*Ta shan zhi shi ke yi gong cuo*” (Another's good quality or suggestion whereby one can remedy one's own defects), we need to allow outside models to enter our system to compare, contrast, and compete with our own solutions to possibly reach a better state of facing the problem. In other words, we are not trying to universalize models; we are allowing different models to be critically tested in different contexts to help people search for the betterment.

As to the nourishment of cultural centrism, I think we should treat it as a strategic necessity, a means rather than an end, in the process of intercultural communication. Intercultural competency required awareness, sensitivity, and effectiveness from both sides of the interactants (Chen, 2005; Chen & Starosta, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2003). The practice of centrism, no matter it is Afrocentrism, Asiacentrism, Eurocentrism, or other kinds of centrism, needs to avoid creating a cultural cocoon, in which we can only play our own game.

Using cultural centrism to fence one's own identity is not inappropriate, but we cannot afford to let the centrism develop into a rigid cultural identity, which leads to, as you mentioned, “mutually destructive interaction.” I think intercultural communication scholars have the responsibility to figure out how to balance cultural centrism while embracing a fluid cultural identity.

**Starosta:** Let me take a breath. Our pace is making me dizzy ☺.

Let's see, we have some convergence of our viewpoints. We have talked about identity, and if it is historically fixed or always being renewed and renegotiated. We passed over whether it is possible to carry the burden of a history we do not think of as our own. We seem to agree that letting history blind a culture can sometimes lead to mutually destructive interaction. But we seem to concur that a centrism can (or should?) be used “as a strategic necessity” to ease the pain and disruption of transition that can accompany extensive intercultural contact. I think we have grounds for agreement regarding many of the topics we have introduced.

The carrying of a colonial or slave identity that was put into place by another entity, to me, may warrant the articulation of the fundamentals of a preferred identity. I see no harm, and see some significant benefit, in providing a more positive way to describe one's own culture, a description that is self-written, not inscribed by a colonial or other power. It seems hazardous to let Asian communication theory to be written by European Orientalists.

Do I think that openness to change universally represents a step forward? I do not know that I can agree to this: It depends on the nature of that change. Sometimes one is well-advised to resist some practices that are common within another culture in favor of one's own ways. I cannot therefore agree that “the lack of openness is the biggest enemy to self improvement,” for, in doing so, I would have to equate “change” to “improvement.” The two can be, and often are, very different matters. Maybe one should sometimes remain “open” in order to see what *not* to learn?

Can cultural remembrance lead to modern-day paralysis? There may be cases where this is true, but I would have to see them on a case-by-case basis to understand your analysis fully.

Is the answer to “cultural blind spots” necessarily to see everything? Even if that were possible, I think we have to consider is the result would be a utopia, or maybe a dystopia.

We seem to differ to a degree on the use of cultural tools from other origins to critique one's own cultural artifacts. With that discussion comes our differences regarding “authenticity.” Ravi Shankar has had to tell numerous international audiences not to think of Indian

*ragas* as “jazz,” Yet, James Galway has performed his flute music with ensembles from innumerable cultures. I think he aimed so “sound” Japanese,” just as Yo-Yo Ma aimed to sound Argentinian, when he did an album of Tango music. Centrism, authentic cultural knowledge, is a source of pride, inspiration, advice, aesthetics, reaffirmation, and solace in a world that, at a level of pop culture, looks a blur of change, but yet looks all the same.

Once I saw a child’s bank where one put in a coin. A hand came out, kept the coin, and turned itself off. It surely cannot be a positive step for a culture to reach out only to turn itself off.

**Chen:** Yes, cultural identity should not be historically fixed, it should be tested in intercultural context, which demands cultural identity to be extended to inter-cultural or even multi-cultural identity (Kim, 1994). In other words, in my opinion, no historically fixed cultural identity can survive in this globally interconnected world. One’s cultural identity should be renewed and renegotiated in the interactional space between or among cultures. This dynamic “third space” will keep one’s cultural identity in a fluid condition, a state where one can demonstrate plasticity in the process of learning and changing, and cultural identity can be flexible enough to avoid being exclusive.

The dynamic “third space” of intercultural interaction as well refers to a state of ceaseless movement or change. I do believe that change itself is the only constant phenomenon of the universe. We might resist change, either unconsciously or strategically, to give our system a chance to grow steadily, so that the system can be stronger in facing the unknown world. But, we need to understand that this hibernating stage is not equal to equilibrium of the system, and if it is extended for long, the system may enter a state of inertia or stasis. A self-destructive effect may be initiated consequently.

Therefore, remaining open to change and making necessary adjustment is the key for the renewal of a culture. However, we should not equate “change” to “improvement.” As I argued before, depending on the scope, volume, and intensity of the change, the outcome of change can be either “good fortune” or “misfortune” (Chen, 2004). That is, a change can lead either to the direction of success or to remorse, humiliation, danger, or even death. The possible self destruction caused by an unprepared change should not discourage a culture to face the change. A competent culture with its autopoietic ability will never hide itself in a self-woven cocoon, in which a wall mentality is developed to perpetuate the exclusivity and permanence of cultural identity/centrism. If cultural authenticity is defined by this kind of hardcore identity/centrism, the goal of intercultural communication will be an unreachable dream.

**Starosta:** Identity should not remain fixed; the dangers of resisting change outweigh the possible benefits of interaction among and between cultures. Your position is posed as a matter of faith, of pure description: change will happen, if we like this or not. William Butler Yeats writes:

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Yate’s observation regarding Ireland was quoted years later by Chinua Achebe from Nigeria: Change happens, with dangerous, disorienting possibilities. Writers from two continents saw that “the center cannot hold,” to which you add a voice from a third continent: “no historically fixed cultural identity can survive in this globally interconnected world.”

We may “either unconsciously or strategically” hold on to central features of an enduring identity, “to give our system a chance to grow steadily, so that the system can be stronger in facing the unknown world.” This statement of ontology seems to mostly downplay agency, in the face of the inevitable. Knowledge of a past would seem to matter very little, if change is written into the natural order of things.

We still do not deal with identities that are inscribed by others, through colonialism or slavery. Our old identity is overwritten by one with more power than we have. Being objectified and defined by a powerful other over a period of time, during which time most evidence of our authentic identity is obliterated or demeaned, until we have no choice but to forget, is a common cultural experience. (In a rough parallel, this equates with a “palimpsest,” an overwritten manuscript or painting.) Ought one fatalistically accept an identity that is inscribed by a powerful other, over another that is offered us by historians who have kept some touch with our pre-colonial definition?

If that is too abstract, let me offer another instance, something simpler. We are aware of cases where geographically-dispersed members of a national or ethnic culture form and maintain virtual communities, using the Internet to stay in touch over great distances. They use small media such as videos to keep a diasporic identity alive and vital even when their members are scattered over far distances. Do virtual diasporic communities disconfirm your projections of the inevitably of change?

**Chen:** We are touching your specialized area of research. I’ll be thrilled if you are willing to say something more about “inscribed identity” and “diasporic experience”. But before you do this, let me first raise a couple related points ☺.

First, the emergence of inscribed identity through colonialism or slavery is a tragic past (and sadly the problem continues to exist in modern world via different forms) and is part of unobliterated human history. To know the situation and to learn how to be reconnected

with one's original cultural tradition, as I previously emphasized, is important for the group to face the problem caused by the inscribed identity so that the group can move on, though, to me, the reconnection with the group's past does not necessarily mean to completely recover it (or may even need to abandon it through the renewing process). I really don't know what will be the effective way for solving the problem of inscribed identity. It reminds me a question about language variation that has been puzzling me for long. We know that the pidgin language is typically developed in a colonial situation, which usually mixes the linguistic features of the oppressor and the oppressed. But after a few generations, a pidgin language may be transformed into a creole (Chen & Strosta, 2005). In other words, when the pidgin language is developed into a creole, it becomes the native language of people in the colonized area. I am not sure if the language identity based on creole can be described as an inscribed identity, though the creole is usually acquired as a native language through a natural process.

I don't know how the case of pidgin-creole language resembles the inscribed identity and how to treat the existing creole language as to inscribed identity. Your comments here may enlighten me.

Second, it is nice to see that geographically-dispersed members of a national or ethnic culture are using modern technology to keep the diasporic identity alive. What's intriguing is the emerging phenomenon of "feeling homesick at home" caused by the trend of globalization. Transportation technology has provided people with the convenience in moving across the national boundary and in having homes in different areas of the globe. I am wondering if someday the diasporic experience will be used to describe the feeling not only in the distant land, but also in the original land. I would like to hear your opinions about the potential impact of this specific globalization trend on the diasporic identity.

**Starosta:** A pidgin language is a common outcome of bringing in slaves from multiple cultures to work together on plantations. Persons from all over West Africa found themselves on a boat making the long passage to the New World, but lacked a common language. They struggled to find ways to interact through language. Then, when the survivors left the ship, they were assigned an overseer who may not have spoken any of these native languages. A simplified speech results that has some words and properties of several or all of the languages. (Pidgin languages have some similar properties wherever they are found.)

Eventually, they take on the shape of the mainstream language, and the children of slaves adopt the pidginized language as their mother tongue. This is the emergence of a creole, a third culture, if you will.

For several generations, the creole will have low social standing. After independence, the speakers of creole may gain in status, as in Jamaica or Haiti. It may become a language of music and popular culture, if not of government.

Our writing on third culture posits that an authentic third culture must grow from reciprocal need, and should grow from choice, not force (Starosta & Chen, 2000). The creolization process represents those with power writing their mainstream language onto non-native populations. If print literacy accompanied the creolization process, perhaps the enslaved populations could have inscribed more of their own identity; but it was a felony to teach literacy to slaves. The oral culture held some power for resistance to definition by the mainstream, or course, but that power was limited: quilting, spirituals, and preaching offered some chance to spread messages of resistance.

Should African Americans now learn Hausa, Yoruba, Twi, Krio and other West African languages? Should Francophone Africa unlearn French? In Cote D'Ivoire, Humphoet Boigny opined that his nation welcomes mental colonization by the French, since he would rather be dominated by a friend than by a stranger (Land, 1990). When one's history has been overwritten by a colonizer, should that person live on colonized terms, or is the situation a palimpsest: some new artworks were painted over the top of older ones. With due care, the older works can sometimes be recovered.

**Chen:** it is quite intriguing to me regarding the recovery of the original language after a creole is developed. Do you think it is realistic to have this kind of expectation? If this happens, I am wondering how the impact will be on the group after the language identity is switched (by force or voluntarily). I think the potential reversibility of creole to the previous language poses a nice research question for intercultural communication study.

The case of creole also makes me think of the role English plays in Hong Kong, and Spanish and Portuguese in Latin America. The languages used in these areas are not necessarily to be treated as creole, but there is no question that they are products of colonization. I cannot imagine what the picture will look like if Hong Kong and Latin America have to give up the colonized language and instead go back to the pre-colonized native tongue (Although Mandarin is gradually taking a more important role in Hong Kong after 1997, the year the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned to PR China, I don't see any sign for English to be replaced by Mandarin there in a short or long term).

People have different levels of identity (Huntington, 1996), the dynamic and interdependent nature of these levels of identity may lead to a complex effect among them when the group needs to redefine one of the levels

of their identity. Do you have any thought on this problem? I also like to hear your opinions, if you don't mind, on the second question about diasporic experience I raised previously.

**Starosta:** If someone were able to determine that her original language was a language or dialect from Ghana or Sierra Leone, they could hypothetically learn the language from remaining speakers of the language. Marcus Garvey's "Africa for Africans" campaign resulted in the resettlement of many black Americans in Liberia, where their descendants continue to live, in a quest to affirm their African heritage. Given the cultural disruption that followed from the institution of slavery, the separation of families, the introduction of Christian names, and other means of disrupting historical identities, though, it is unlikely for African Americans to be able to determine their precise lineage.

African Americans could choose to live as mainstream US Americans, of course, to the extent permitted by the US mainstream. They could voluntarily complete the process of overwriting their ancestral heritage with a new text. They might never show curiosity about their cultural essence, what was quintessentially African about them. Or they could offer resistance. From their position on one edge of the US culture, living as "outsiders within," they could attempt to center their lives and identities more centrally on things African.

If they chose to discover the painting under the painting, or the scroll under the scroll, they would start with the knowledge that their precise heritage would remain unknowable. They would have to come up with some approximation of the original, based on clues and conjectures provided by anthropologists and historians and students of orature. Because the new creation could never equal the actuality of the lost history and identity, the quest would become more important than the exact destination. Yesterday, one of my students coined a phrase, "quintessence without constraints" (Shi, 2006), that captures for me the embracing of a general reconstruction of a lost cultural history without being held to strict accountability regarding historic detail and parentage.

Must an African American learn Krio upon suspecting s/he had Sierra Leone ancestors? Or would s/he more profitably submerge himself or herself in the study of West Africa, to gain a general sense of things cultural that were lost or stolen? I speak to an approximation of the old culture, not to its exact rediscovery. And I speak to a coexistence of a renewed understanding of one's cultural origin with the present, localized-yet-globalized moment.

**Chen:** Thank you so much for this thought provoking dialogue. I am sure there is much left to say about this "quintessence without constraints". We shall continue this endless dialogue sometime somewhere.

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